

Contra Costa Fire District needs a \$90 parcel tax to avert station closures.

Request stuns County supervisors who said it is double what they expected.

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MARTINEZ -- Central Contra Costa residents could lose six fire stations if they fail to pass a yearly \$90 per parcel tax in November, Contra Costa Fire Chief Daryl Louder told shocked county supervisors Tuesday.

No tax has been put on the ballot yet. But the rate the chief quoted is more than double what supervisors were told last year in preliminary talks, and they publicly rebuked Louder over the unpleasant surprise.

"We do need a measure," said Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond. "But we have to be sensitive to what the public is willing to pay and balance that with the needs of the fire district. Before we put an amount out there, it needs to come to us. I don't want to be kept in the dark."

What people will pay is a question for pollsters and, ultimately, the voters.

But Louder said the money would avert a "catastrophic" shutdown of six of the district's 28 fire stations and the loss of 63 firefighters from the existing staff of 261.

Response times will drop, the agency will have less capacity to help its neighbors in big incidents and fire insurance on shops and homes will rise, the chief said.

The district already falls short of standards set by the International City/County Management Association of one firefighter per 1,000 residents. Under that standard, Contra Costa should have 600 firefighters for its 600,000 residents.

The staffing ratio would drop to one-third of a firefighter per 1,000 people without the tax revenues and "there is no jurisdiction in the nation with our level of risk that has staffing levels that low," Louder said.

The district's revenues have declined precipitously since 2008, when property values plummeted in the housing crash.

The drop coincides with increased firefighter pension costs caused by poor retirement pool investment returns and generous benefits adopted a decade ago during good economic times.

The district encompasses an area from Antioch westward, through all of central county and a small portion of West Contra Costa.

But the fire district isn't alone. State and local agencies will also be looking for money in the November election, and supervisors have already voiced concerns about voter fatigue. The East Contra Costa County Fire District and a handful of area cities and school districts already have tax measures on the June ballot.

Critics will likely demand cost reductions through reforms of the traditional fire service model, such as whether minimum staffing levels are required to operate expensive firefighting equipment for many routine medical calls.

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