

San Pablo near deal on firefighters

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SAN PABLO — After months of wrangling over staffing and costs of fire protection in San Pablo, a tentative deal would allow Contra Costa firefighters to continue to operate Station 70 near City Hall while neighboring Richmond takes over dispatch.

The agreement, which came out of a San Pablo City Council study session earlier this month, would eliminate a second engine company, 70A, that has operated since last fall out of a different station, Station 70, under a pilot program. It would, however, add one firefighter to the three currently staffing Engine 70.

"This is a great step," said fire Capt. Vince Wells, acting president of Local 1230, the union that represents county firefighters.

County Supervisor John Gioia, fire Chief Keith Richter, Richmond fire Chief Michael Banks and Wells all agreed that the arrangement would eliminate the delays that occur when Richmond police and fire dispatchers transfer to the county 911 calls from San Pablo.

The county and Richmond, which also dispatches for El Cerrito and Kensington, have separate communication systems; transferring San Pablo's fire-related 911 calls to the county's dispatchers results in a two-minute delay on average, Richter said.

Three Richmond fire stations on San Pablo's periphery are closer to Station 70 than the nearest county station in El Sobrante; thus Richmond firefighters frequently respond to San Pablo emergencies. The county last year paid Richmond

\$180,000 for automatic aid, which San Pablo reimbursed to the county, Richter and acting San Pablo City Manager Kelsey Worthy said.

San Pablo is part of the county fire district, which provides fire protection in the city. But San Pablo has voluntarily carried the cost of automatic aid and has budgeted \$700,000 next year for enhanced fire protection and emergency medical service.

That amount would cover the \$550,000 to \$600,000 that Richter and Gioia estimate it will cost next year for the fourth firefighter position at Station 70 and associated costs. But it would fall short of also covering automatic aid costs, which likely will go up next year by about \$60,000, to about \$240,000. Gioia said he is hopeful San Pablo might agree to pay the county a bit more than \$700,000, but Worthy said Friday that \$700,000 is "a firm number."

The San Pablo City Council is expected to discuss the tentative agreement and payment to the county on Sept. 2.

Discussions have gone back and forth since the county earlier this year asked San Pablo to assume the full \$2.4 million-a-year cost of the second fire company at Station 70; the county fire district collects about \$840,000 a year in property taxes from the city, leaving a shortfall of about \$1.5 million.

San Pablo, noting that the majority of calls at Station 70 are medical rather than fire-related, proposed instead to pay American Medical Response \$700,000 to station an ambulance with a crew of two around-the-clock in San Pablo.

The county proposed that San Pablo pay the \$700,000 to the county instead for enhanced service.

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