

Oakley fire staffing increased

by Dave Roberts
05.28.09 - 02:17 pm



Oakley Mayor Carol Rios reads a proclamation at Tuesday's council meeting honoring Dr. Carol Boyd, Oakley Union Elementary School District assistant superintendent for education services, upon her retirement after more than 37 years in education, 29 of which were with OUESD.

Photo by Dave Roberts

Oakley's fire station, the busiest in far East County, is now getting some much-needed staffing help, and the firefighters might be moving to a new station in the city.

Those were two pieces of good news in a presentation at Tuesday's City Council meeting by Hugh Henderson, acting chief of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD).

The firefighters working out of Oakley's fire station responded to 1,520 calls in 2008, edging out Brentwood's two fire stations, which received 1,492 and 1,277 calls, respectively.

Despite having the busiest station, Oakley also has been the most undermanned area because it has only one station, while Brentwood and Discovery Bay each have two.

As a result, with two people working per shift at a station, each Oakley firefighter must protect more than 16,000 people and cover more than six square miles in the city. That's twice as much coverage area and a third more people than each Brentwood firefighter is responsible for – and three times as much area and four times as many people as in Discovery Bay.

Beginning in April, however, a third firefighter has been added to each shift in Oakley. Brentwood has also benefited with an additional firefighter per shift being shared between that city's two stations. This will bring the number of calls per firefighter in Oakley, 760, the highest in far East County, down to 507 calls/firefighter, less than the 554 calls/firefighter in Brentwood.

Henderson has been able to increase staffing at the same time his district is being hit with the same budget crunch facing all other governmental entities. Revenues from property taxes, which were around \$12 million a year ago, are projected to decrease to a little more than \$10 million in the coming year.

At the same time, spending has increased from about \$11 million a year ago to more than \$12 million in the coming year and \$13 million the year after that. The difference is being made up by drawing down the reserve fund, which had been about \$6 million and is projected to drop below \$2 million in the next two years.

One of the main reasons for the district's tough financial situation – which has prevented every station from being staffed around the clock with three firefighters, as is the case in other districts – is that the district receives less than half of the property tax collected in other districts.

That's because when the assessment levels were established under Proposition 13, far East County was still a rural area employing volunteer and paid on-call

firefighters and didn't need as much money per capita to get the job done. The changeover to professional, full-time firefighters has made costs rise.

The other good news for Oakley is that the current fire station, which was built in the 1960s at Second and Acme streets, is planned to be replaced by a more centrally located station at O'Hara Avenue and La Vina Way.

"This location is along a key arterial between Oakley and Brentwood and is farther south than the present location (which has coverage area that extends into the water)," said City Manager Bryan Montgomery via e-mail. "All that have reviewed the site have deemed it 'superior' to the current location. The current station is in need of expansion and updating, so that is another reason for the relocation."

The new site is on city-owned property, and the money to build the station will come from fees collected on new development. The site of the current station will eventually be converted to a parking lot, said Montgomery.

Henderson said that ECCFPD is not able to outgrow its funding shortfall when more houses are built in far East County. It would require more than 74,000 new houses to be built at an average of \$250,000 per house to provide the \$13 million in additional revenue needed to provide three firefighters at each station around the clock.

The solution has yet to be found, but the fire district situation in the county is currently being studied by an ad hoc committee of the Local Agency Formation Commission. ECCFPD is scheduled to be reviewed on June 8 and 25 at 9 a.m. in the county Board of Supervisors chambers in Martinez.

"I do appreciate the amount of time you've put into this," Councilwoman Pat Anderson told Henderson. "We've seen changes with the personnel, the three, in Oakley. I will credit you with a lot of that. We all understand this is a difficult problem. I'm not sure what the answer is.

"There's going to have to be some type of a fee structure. We are committed to making fire service from our perspective as good as it can be with the dollars that we have. With the (fire district) consolidation in 2002, the supervisors said they want top-quality service. We want that, too. I do believe you understand our angst."