

Grand jury mulls obstacles fighting Bethel Island fires

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Efforts to help firefighters respond more effectively to emergencies on Bethel Island have started paying off, despite the challenges described in a recent grand jury report.

In its examination of the irony — a Delta community that's surrounded by water, but where putting out fires can be tough — the Contra Costa County grand jury acknowledged the problems that East Contra Costa Fire District has grappled with for years.

The document described less-than-ideal response times, broken hydrants, firefighters unfamiliar with the island's quirky features and difficulty accessing backup water supplies.

But since September when one home on Taylor Slough burned to the ground and an adjoining house sustained major damage, the special district has made progress.

Spurred to action after witnessing the blaze, Bethel Island resident Mark Whitlock and a group of other concerned property owners began working with fire Chief Hugh Henderson to come up with ways of improving service.

The agency recently finished installing standard-issue padlocks on cables that are strung across access points around the levee, ensuring that all district firefighters can get an engine through the

barriers.

In addition, the five fire hydrants on Bethel Island Road — the only public ones on the entire island — are expected to be operational again in about a month after being out of commission for a long time.

Late last year, the district also replaced the three heavy rubber hoses on each of its engines with ones made from a lighter material so that now a single firefighter can carry one of these water lines.

In addition, Henderson said that his agency eventually will install about four dozen so-called dry hydrants around the island. They are made of 6-inch pipes that will extend from the Delta to the top of the levee.

Firefighters quickly can hook their hoses to these pipes instead of having to clamber down levee slopes covered with riprap and navigate obstacles such as dilapidated docks and broken pilings.

Still, the fire district is saddled with one impediment that does not have a ready solution — money.

"They're on a very limited budget," Whitlock said. "Individuals are not given enough tools to do their job."

East Contra Costa Fire District receives nearly all its funding from property taxes, income that has dropped off as the area's home values have taken a nose dive.

In addition, the agency receives a smaller share of property tax revenue than some other fire protection districts.

The district had to dip into reserves to balance this year's budget, and it is set to pull out an additional

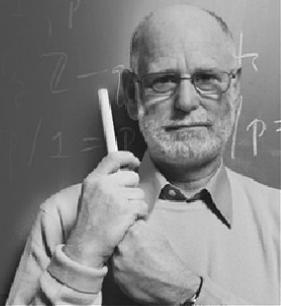
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\$1.7 million to ensure that revenues match expenses in 2009-10.

Next year's \$12.2 million budget must support Bethel Island's six-person crew as well as eight other fire stations from Oakley to Discovery Bay and the Marsh Creek area.

Translation: The agency only can afford to send two officers out on an engine instead of three that's the norm among fire protection agencies in the county.

The grand jury report also noted that response times on Bethel Island were more than eight minutes on average over a 13-month period from 2007 to 2008.

A consulting firm the year before had indicated that the agency's response times should be five minutes.

As for offering concrete solutions to these difficulties, however, jurors had less to say.

One of their recommendations is to form an oversight commission representing the seven communities that the fire district serves to help Henderson prioritize spending and improve response times.

Jury foreman Leslie Lea said she thinks the real purpose of the group, however, is to give residents more of a voice.

The grand jury also advised the district to give firefighters more training so that they are well acquainted with Bethel Island's particular set of challenges, which include finding the scene of an emergency.

A few streets have the same name, and some homeowners do not have their addresses displayed.

Although the grand jury cannot mandate compliance, East Contra Costa Fire District and the county Board of Supervisors are required to respond to its report by early August.

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