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Oakley OKs local fire district board

by Samie Hartley
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The Oakley City Council joined the County Board of Supervisors (BOS) and the Brentwood City Council in voting Tuesday to provide local control over fire protection in far East County.

By unanimous vote, the Oakley council approved the creation of a locally based governing board for the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD).

District V Supervisor Federal Glover told the council it's time for the local communities to take control of the district, which is now run by the BOS in Martinez.

“One of the things that was very clear from the residents of this particular region is that there is a need for some local control, and we've been trying to work on that (for a few years),” he said. “Decisions for this region should be made locally and not in Martinez. It's one of the things that the Board of Supervisors is willing to give up so that the local authorities will have that ability to make decisions and go forward to determine what quality of services are needed here and improve the safety of services for our firefighters for the East County region.”

The new board will consist of nine members chosen proportionally according to the population of the areas within the district. Four will come from Brentwood, three from Oakley and two from the unincorporated areas of Knightsen, Bethel Island, Byron and Discovery Bay.

Councilwoman Pat Anderson said that might seem to be a large number for a board of directors, but a locally controlled board is what East County needs at this time to help bring in more funding. “Fire is a difficult issue in terms of funding. We all want more but have very little funding to do what we need to do. We have fabulous firefighters who work very, very hard every day – every moment – and out in this area, they work for less than their compadres on the other side of the county. It doesn't mean that they give us less. I believe they give us more.”

United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County Local 1230 Vice President Gil Guerrero spoke before the council, requesting its support and asserting that the new board would help the ECCFPD grow in the right direction.

The ECCFPD was created in 2002, consolidating the Bethel Island, East Diablo and Oakley-Knightsen fire protection districts into one district to serve far East County. The campaign for the new, independent board has been discussed

between all involved entities for the past two years. A year ago, Mayor Carol Rios opposed the creation of a new board, but now believes it's the right direction for the future of the ECCFPD.

"Local control is really important," Rios said. "A year ago I was against this, but in a year's time, you have a lot of time to think and to look at it in a different way. And I think there's been growth. I think that we've all grown and had a chance to see what it could be. ... I think it's time to support local control. And the way the board is made up, I am very comfortable with the design. And I hope soon, not now but soon, that it will be an elected board."

The issue will return to the BOS for a final vote now that the cities have signed on. That vote should come on Nov. 10, followed by a transition period during which the new board will be seated. The two city councils will name the representatives from their communities, while the BOS will choose the representatives from the unincorporated areas. The new group is expected to take over on Feb. 10, 2010.

Each board member will serve a term of four years and must live within the ECCFPD boundaries. The board will address issues such as firefighter salaries, staffing and station locations, as well as take on the challenge of district funding. Because it is comprised of what used to be volunteer districts, the ECCFPD receives just 7 percent of the property tax paid by its residents. Fire districts elsewhere in the county get about 12 percent.

As a result of the under-funding, ECCFPD engines have only two firefighters aboard instead of the industry standard three, and neither is a paramedic. Wages are also higher in other areas.

Councilman Jim Frazier emphasized the need for more funding, which observers agree is more likely to be approved by district taxpayers with a local governing board in place.

"It's been a long time coming," said Rios after the 5-0 vote, "but we're finally here."

[Click here](#) to find out what the City of Brentwood had to say on the subject.

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