

[print](#)

## ***Editorial: Fiddling stops before district burns***

---

11.05.09 - 02:54 pm

“Nero fiddled while Rome burned,” the saying goes. Although there weren’t actually any fiddles in AD 64, there’s been too much fiddling in far East County while the issue of how to provide adequate fire protection has burned and burned and burned.

Two years ago Contra Costa County, along with the cities of Brentwood and Oakley, agreed to form a new governing board for the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD). The local, nine-member board would replace the five county supervisors who have been calling the shots in the district since its formation seven years ago. Unfortunately, Oakley City Council members pulled out of the plan a year and a half ago due to a dispute with county officials over land transfers that had nothing to do with fire protection.

With the plan for the new board shot down in flames, Oakley and Brentwood officials sought to annex into the better-funded Contra Costa Fire Protection District. That district turned thumbs down on the request, however, pointing out that far East County is underfunded for the amount of service required.

So, after two years with nothing to show for it, Oakley council members have finally agreed to join with Brentwood and the county in forming the new governing board. It’s hard to say whether any lives or structures that might otherwise have been saved with standardized fire protection were lost in the meantime, but we congratulate local officials for stepping up to the plate to deal with this difficult, but vital, issue.

When it is formed early next year, the board – comprised of four members from Brentwood, three from Oakley and two from unincorporated far East County – will need to figure out how to beef up fire protection in this area while not burning too large of a hole in local wallets.

ECCFPD has been underfunded because just over half of local property taxes go toward the fire district in comparison with other areas of the county. As a result, the district has been dipping into its reserve fund to the tune of \$2 million per year the past couple of years in order to keep a minimum of two firefighters in each of the district’s eight stations, along with three firefighters at the Oakley station and one of the two Brentwood stations.

Job 1 will be figuring out how to apply a tourniquet to stop the fiscal hemorrhaging while continuing to provide at least the current level of fire protection in a 250-square-mile area containing about 100,000 people. The bigger job will be determining how to beef up fire protection, preferably to the standard of three firefighters on duty around the clock at each station. That could cost an extra \$5 million per year, possibly resulting in an annual property tax hike of \$200-\$250 per residence.

Needless to say, it would be a tall order to get far East County residents to agree to increase their taxes by that amount after two years of the Great Recession in

which nearly everyone has been forced to cut back on expenses just to get by. It will require creativity, perhaps thinking outside the fire engine box, such as increased privatization of medical and rescue personnel, relocation of fire stations to urban areas, returning to trained volunteers and increasing the number of reserve firefighters while reducing full-time firefighters.

It won't be easy. We believe the initial appointments to the new fire board should be taken from city councils and elected municipal advisory committees to provide some ballot-box weight and responsiveness to the process of charting the district's course, and that a move to a directly elected fire board should then follow. With the backing of the voters, the board members would be better enabled to make the hard decisions, including the possibility of placing a tax measure on the ballot. The good news is that far East County fire protection is finally on the right track, and local people will soon be driving the train.

---

© thepress.net 2009