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Local control comes to East Contra Costa Fire District

By Rowena Coetsee
Contra Costa Times

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BRENTWOOD — Empty seats were hard to find Wednesday when East Contra Costa County's locally controlled fire district board met for the first time.

Uniformed firefighters were a dominant presence in the audience as the East Contra Costa Fire District's nine newly appointed directors took the reins of an agency that has generated years of debate over how it should be run.

A four-man color guard kicked off the proceedings at the Brentwood Education and Technology Center, after which a battalion chief officiated over the swearing-in of board members.

Until late October, county supervisors governed the fire district, but the new appointees all live in the communities it serves.

That down-home leadership and accountability will serve the community well, said District 3 Supervisor Mary Piepho, who along with District 5 Supervisor Federal Glover attended the meeting to acknowledge the hand-over.

Seated around the large curved desk were Brentwood Mayor Bob Taylor and Brentwood council

members Bob Brockman, Chris Becnel and Erick Stonebarger, and Oakley Mayor Pat Anderson and council members Kevin Romick and Jim Frazier.

And providing a voice for those in East County's unincorporated areas were Robert Kenny, of Bethel Island, and Chris Finetti, of Discovery Bay.

Tackling its first order of business, the group deadlocked over the choice of a president but ultimately tapped Stonebarger.

"I hope future business is easier," he quipped.

Directors followed up by unanimously choosing Romick as vice president.

The East Contra Costa Fire District was established in November 2002 by consolidating three smaller fire districts, which eliminated duplication of effort and saved money.

The district encompasses approximately 250 square miles and serves an estimated 105,000 residents in seven communities from Bethel Island, Byron and Knightsen to the Marsh Creek/Morgan Territory corridor.

Although the eight stations it operates originally were staffed with both full-time and paid on-call firefighters, they all are now full-time.

Still, money remains tight: Plummeting real estate prices have cost the district property tax revenue, and this year's \$12.2 million budget isn't large enough to hire the 24 additional firefighters needed to have three at every station, acting fire Chief Hugh Henderson said.

The district currently has 48 full-time firefighters.

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Minimizing turnover by paying them competitive wages is another challenge, he said.

Bethel Island's aging fire station has been condemned because of mold, lead paint and asbestos, Henderson added, and the district has a number of old vehicles that are reaching the end of their usefulness.

Imposing a local tax might be a way to boost revenue, he said. Another option could be charging fees for certain services the agency provides such as responding to vehicle accidents involving people who don't live in the fire district, Henderson said.

Board members plan to tour fire stations as part of a Feb. 27 workshop in which they will discuss the challenges facing the agency.

Contact Rowena Coetsee at 925-779-7141.

IF YOU're GOING WHAT: East Contra Costa Fire District meeting WHEN: 6:30 p.m., first Monday of each month WHERE: Oakley City Hall, 3231 Main St. DETAILS: 925-634-3400

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