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Fire station closures to move forward

by Rick Lemyre
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The East Contra Costa Fire Protection District this week set the stage for closing two fire stations as soon as next month.

In a meeting attended by about 100 members of the public Monday, the ECCFPD board ordered staff to prepare a budget that includes 48 firefighters and six stations. The

current service model includes 45 firefighters (an additional five vacant positions are covered by overtime) and eight stations.

Currently, six of the eight stations are staffed with two firefighters (the industry standard is three) while two are staffed with three. The budget the ECCFPD board has requested would staff four stations with three firefighters and two stations with two. The district covers 250 square miles of far East Contra Costa, including Brentwood, Oakley, Discovery Bay, Bethel Island, Byron and Knightsen.

Many of those in attendance Tuesday implored the district to “look under every rock” to find a way to keep all the stations open. Many echoed the words of Board Member Chris Finetti of Discovery Bay, who read a statement at the beginning of the meeting. It said, in part: “I’d like to state for the record that I’m not going to be able to support any options that include station closure at this time. I believe it would be reckless to remove fire protection from the public just as we enter fire season, and while we fortunately have reserves that can still protect us during the next fiscal year while we address this problem in a more informed, less reactive way.

“I think that the worst thing we can do is put the communities we serve at risk by making the drastic decision to close stations without considering other options, and especially without allowing the public the opportunity to support a revenue enhancement.”

Because district funding was established when far East County fire protection was provided largely by paid-on-call volunteers, and because the current recession has decimated property tax revenues, the district is operating at a deficit. Over the last two years, revenue has fallen nearly 25 percent, and another 10-percent drop is expected next year. This year the shortfall amounts to \$1.7 million; next year’s is expected to be \$2.3 million. Before the 2012-13 fiscal year ends, cash reserves being used to make up the shortfall will be exhausted and the district could face bankruptcy.

The 48 firefighter/six station plan would save the district \$814,000 in personnel costs. Dropping a contract with CalFire to staff an additional station on Marsh

Creek Road (CalFire pays to keep the station open during the fire season) saves \$366,000, and shuttering two stations cuts \$70,000 from the operations budget. The total savings in the plan are \$1.25 million.

Acting Fire Chief Hugh Henderson told the board that cuts alone cannot solve the district's financial woes. Even the most severe option examined – eliminating six firefighters and three stations – would stave off the potential bankruptcy only one year longer.

A number of possible actions were brought up at the meeting, including charging out-of-area people for emergency services, contracting with CalFire to run the district, borrowing, selling the district's fire boat and going to the cities within the district and asking for money. Board members said that those options had been looked at before, and were either impractical or did not make enough of a difference to stave off the inevitable: a tax increase.

Several board members said they did not believe residents of the district would support a new tax unless the board, which took control of the district from the County Board of Supervisors earlier this year, proved it could produce a budget for this year given the resources it has, and showed it could make difficult and possibly unpopular decisions needed to ultimately resolve the problem.

“We can't go out and ask the citizens of East County to raise taxes if we can't take the abuse that might come by closing stations,” said Board Member Kevin Romick of Oakley.

Adding urgency to the situation is the fact that it will take 18 months to prepare a ballot measure, submit it to voters and, if it passes, begin to receive revenue. Chairman Erick Stonebarger of Brentwood said the board must be sure it's asking for enough, as there will be no second chance.

“We're only going to get one shot at this,” he said. “We better make sure the number is right.”

Although no decision was made about which stations might face closure, discussion centered on the three that answer the fewest calls: Station 95 in Bethel Island (383 calls per year), Station 58 in Discovery Bay (379), and Station 57 in Byron (294).

Henderson's report showed response times would increase in the areas now served by those stations were they closed. In Station 95's area, the response could go from 7.1 minutes to an estimated 12 to 18 minutes; Station 57's area could go from 7.5 minutes to 12 to 14 minutes; and Station 58's area could go from 6.5 minutes to 9 to 11.

While some response times would increase, the three-person crews at most stations would increase efficiency in other ways, Stonebarger pointed out, since they would allow more calls to be answered by one engine instead of two. The additional help would also keep the firefighters safer and reduce fatigue.

Many of those in attendance Tuesday came from Bethel Island, whose remote location, large number of seniors and combustible peat soil pose special concerns. "East County has always treated Bethel Island as the poor second cousin," said island resident Linda Robertson. "If you take our fire station, we're pretty much doomed. People will die, houses will burn, and businesses will burn."

Bethel Island's situation is further complicated by the condition of Station 95, which has been condemned due to mold, lead paint and asbestos. The challenges of building on the island's floodplain makes replacing it more expensive.

A special meeting was called for June 29, when the board will adopt its new budget and decide which stations will close. The closures will likely stay open until mid-July to help get through the July 4 fireworks season.

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