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## East Contra Costa Fire District puts off election on choosing directors

By Rowena Coetsee  
Contra Costa Times

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OAKLEY -- Directors of the East Contra Costa Fire District have postponed the approval of an election to determine how they are chosen, opting instead to ask voters for more money first.

At a special meeting Monday, the nine-member board agreed that it made more sense to find out whether district residents would support an assessment before asking them whether they want elected or appointed representatives.

The consensus was a departure from discussions last month in which directors were leaning toward holding an election in May to determine whether the board would go from being appointed by county supervisors and city councils to chosen directly by voters.

The plan was to propose a property-based benefit assessment later that same month in hopes of keeping the fire district solvent.

The district last year closed two of its eight stations in an attempt to offset the loss of property tax revenue, but the agency still is expected to run out of money before the end of the 2012-13 fiscal year if nothing changes.

At the district's Feb. 7 meeting, directors are scheduled to approve the hiring of an engineer to calculate how much more each property owner would be asked to pay with an assessment. The board then would call for an election, which is expected to happen about April.

On Monday, directors backed away from scheduling a mail-ballot election this spring on the selection process for directors, with some saying they could not

justify the estimated \$95,350 cost when the district is cash-poor.

The tab ultimately would be twice that amount, because if voters decided to move to elected representation, there would have to be a second election to choose those representatives.

"I have a really hard time spending this money," said Pat Anderson, who represents Oakley on the board. "I want to stay here (on the board) and find a way to get through this."

Director Erick Stonebarger argued that it is illogical to deal with how the board is elected before ensuring that the district has enough money to continue operating.

Kevin Romick, an Oakley councilman, agreed. "We need to focus on revenue," he said.

Not everyone initially agreed that an assessment should be the first order of business, however.

Bob Brockman, a Brentwood councilman, urged his colleagues to put the matter of how the board is chosen to voters, noting that the fire district board has talked about changing the status quo on multiple occasions but never taken the step.

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Chris Finetti, of Discovery Bay, said the board's current composition has prompted some constituents to raise the question of divided loyalties.

Doubtful that directors can champion the interests of the district as a whole when they also are expected to represent their respective communities, residents have told him that they won't support an assessment until the makeup of the board changes, Finetti said.

In the end, however, he and the others who wanted to proceed with an election on the board-selection process changed their minds.

The fire district still can put the matter to voters in August or November.

**Contact Rowena Coetsee at 925-779-7141.**

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