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County weighs fire district parcel tax

By Rick Radin
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The county's largest fire district is considering a parcel tax measure as early as next year to bolster a budget that is projected to be about \$9 million short of maintaining current service in the 2011-12 fiscal year.

The Contra Costa County Fire District plans to use about \$10 million out of \$18.2 million it holds in reserve next year to prevent or slow station closures and other cost-saving moves, said Jackie Lorrekovich, the district's chief of administrative services.

It has eliminated one fire engine brigade in a Walnut Creek station to cope with a financial picture that has darkened over the past three to four years as property tax revenues have plummeted.

The district serves Antioch, Clayton, Concord, Lafayette, Martinez, Pittsburg, Pleasant Hill, San Pablo and Walnut Creek.

District management commissioned a telephone survey of 800 likely voters in February. The poll reported that 63 percent would be likely to support a \$72-a-year-per-parcel levy in the November 2012 election that would raise \$12.5 million to \$16.5 million annually to cover shortfalls.

About 67 percent of likely voters supported a \$60-per-year tax and 72 percent approved a \$48-per-year tax. A parcel tax would require a two-thirds majority to pass.

The top reason for supporting a tax was to ensure prompt response times to 911 medical emergencies. The most popular reason for opposing a tax was the weakness of the economy.

Likely voters were

less enthusiastic about creating a benefit assessment district where property owners only would be able to cast votes proportional to how much they would have to pay.

A benefits assessment district could be approved with a simple majority of the weighted vote.

Fire Chief Daryl Louder presented the poll results to the county Board of Supervisors, who control the district, at its April 5 meeting.

"We voted to accept the results of the poll, but we did not vote to place anything on the ballot," said Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond. "We expressed an interest in exploring this."

Supervisors will consider the district's proposed budget Tuesday as part of the proposed county budget.

The fire district budget proposal calls for a total of \$99.9 million in spending for 2010-11, up from the \$94.9 million the district will spend this year. It will have to spend \$108.9 million to maintain current levels of service, according to estimates.

About 85 percent of the budget goes for salaries and benefits. Salaries are expected to rise slightly while pension costs for current and retired workers are expected to nearly double from \$6.4 million to \$11.9 million, mostly because of stock market losses.

Health care costs for retirees are expected to rise, while the district plans to spend less on workers'

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compensation insurance and health care premiums for current workers.

The district relies heavily on overtime to avoid adding pension and benefit payments for new workers. The firefighter with the most overtime in 2009 added more than \$136,000 to his base salary of nearly \$96,000.

Contra Costa is talking with the firefighters union to see if it can reduce its labor costs, which Gioia said is key to making a parcel tax feasible.

"We cannot go to the voters to achieve new revenue without achieving new cost savings," he said.

Contact Rick Radin at 925-779-7166.



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