

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Contra Costa fire district finds a lifeline in \$6.5 million federal grant

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Contra Costa Times

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MARTINEZ -- The Contra Costa Fire District on Tuesday accepted a two-year, \$6.5 million federal grant that will avert shutting down two engine companies and save as many as 21 firefighter jobs.

But the severely challenged fire agency -- the county's largest fire department -- may still close at least two of its 30 engine companies at not-yet-determined stations as it struggles to balance its budget for the next fiscal year.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency money comes with strings attached: The board of supervisors may not lay off any firefighters during the grant period and must maintain a 260-firefighter minimum staffing level.

Congress passed the national stopgap funding to help local governments survive the recession and avoid severe service disruptions.

The initial grant program "was intended to allow the addition of staff to departments," said Fire Chief Daryl Louder. "But over the past few years, the federal government changed the regulations to allow organizations to maintain staffing levels and eliminated the matching portion of the grant, which is a big advantage to the district."

The Contra Costa Fire District needed the emergency cash.

Supervisors are discussing asking voters to approve a parcel or other fire safety tax in 2012, but if successful, it would take at least two years for the agency to see the money.

Recession-ravaged property tax revenue may not return to previous levels for years.

Even

with the federal help, the fire district board anticipates closing at least two of its 30 engine companies after July 1, the start of the next fiscal year.

The department is funded entirely through property taxes and has experienced dramatic financial losses in the aftermath of the 2008 real estate market plunge. Despite its dwindling budget, annual pension contribution costs for its firefighters will double to \$12.5 million next fiscal year because of changes in the way the retirement board calculates the rates.

County Administrator David Twa has said it is only a matter of time before residents begin to see station closures and longer response times.

Firefighters have deferred 5 percent pay raises, although those increases are scheduled to go into effect next fiscal year unless the union agrees again to postpone them. Administrators haven't had pay raises in four years. The agency is not replacing aging fire equipment.

The agency shut down one engine company in Walnut Creek last year.

No decision has been made as to which two companies could go next fiscal year, but stations under consideration include two in Concord and one each in Martinez, Lafayette and Pittsburg.

Louder and Firefighters Local 1230 President Vince

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Wells are talking about alternatives, including union concessions that would help the district without losing engine companies.

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