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Brentwood to consider starting own fire district

By Hannah Dreier
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BRENTWOOD -- Citing their responsibility to keep residents safe, city leaders have decided to explore pulling out of the struggling East Contra Costa Fire District.

The City Council this week instructed staff members to prepare the necessary paperwork for an application to the Local Agency Formation Commission, which governs boundary changes and the formation of special districts, for a Brentwood-only fire agency. The council will decide whether to proceed with the application after the city staff presents the appropriate forms and resolutions at the May 24 council meeting.

Council members emphasized that they are only exploring options, not abandoning the financially strapped East County agency.

"I don't believe we have an option but to evaluate all of the options that are in front of us," said Councilman Erick Stonebarger, who sits on the East Contra Costa fire board and the city's ad-hoc fire subcommittee.

The East Contra Costa Fire District was formed in 2002 through the consolidation of three local agencies. It is funded almost entirely by property taxes, and has struggled in the wake of the housing crash.

The district hoped to remain solvent with the help of a property assessment, but that effort stalled earlier this month when directors scuttled a report needed to bring the matter before voters.

Postponing a decision on how to drum up funds will force the district to continue going through its savings at a rate of

\$2 million this year alone, according to fire Chief

Hugh Henderson.

The assessment would have generated an estimated \$3.9 million the first year for the fire district, which is expected to run out of reserves before the end of the 2012-13 fiscal year.

On Tuesday, Firefighters Local 1230 President Vince Wells urged the council not to abandon the fire district.

"We'd hate to see this effort from Brentwood to alienate itself from the fire district," he said, noting that the city benefits from all six East County fire stations, not just the two in its city limits.

But the council agreed that the city needs to prepare for the possibility that the fire district will run out of money, leaving residents vulnerable to fires and other emergencies.

"Brentwood has to protect its own," Mayor Bob Taylor said. "We have to protect our citizens and our businesses."

The city has not yet assessed the financial impact of leaving the fire district.

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