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## Brentwood to study leaving fire district

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by Rick Lemyre

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The Brentwood City Council voted unanimously Tuesday to begin work on possibly establishing a Brentwood-only fire department, a decision that could cripple the effort to save the financially beleaguered East Contra Costa Fire Protection District that now

serves the city.

The move comes a week after the ECCFPD's eight-member board, which includes four Brentwood councilmen, unanimously rejected an engineer's report that was to have been the basis for forming a district-wide benefit assessment district. The district is currently spending about \$2.5 million per year more than it receives in property taxes, a result of plummeting property values and a tax revenue share established when the population was smaller and local fire service was provided mostly by volunteers.

Unless new revenue source is found, the district will run out of money by the middle of 2012. The rejection of the engineering report means no new money will be available until at least the beginning of 2012, assuming another revenue measure is put before voters and passed in the meantime.

Brentwood's vote approved the recommendation of its Fire Subcommittee (Vice Mayor Steve Barr, also a fire board member, and Councilman Erick Stonebarger, also the fire board president) which was established several months ago "to work parallel (with the district's effort) because we knew there was a chance we would go down this path," Stonebarger said. It amounts to a Plan B, he said, not an abandonment of the effort to find a solution for the entire district. "It's putting us in a position to have an option" so that residents of Brentwood would still have fire service should efforts to save the ECCFPD continue to be unsuccessful.

Gil Guerrero, vice president of firefighter's union Local 1230, urged the council not to make the move. He called it "premature" to begin down the separation path before having collected enough information to know if separation was even possible, and thinks it will undermine the public trust needed to save the district.

"It sends the wrong message," he said. "People will wonder: are they (Brentwood) lowering their life boats? Is the president (Stonebarger) leaving the ship?" The uncertainty will only make passage of any revenue enhancement that might save the district all the more difficult.

Discovery Bay resident Bob Mankin agreed, telling the council that the move “left a crater in your credibility” and that it’s possible a vote of “no confidence” might be registered against the Brentwood contingent by the rest of the fire board when it meets again in June.

Commissioner Jim Frazier, also Oakley’s mayor, isn’t even sure that the next fire board meeting can be held. Given Brentwood’s decision to look at going it alone, lawyers are looking at whether they can continue to vote on district matters and, since a quorum of Brentwood’s council sits on the fire board, whether they can even discuss their decisions as a City Council at fire meetings.

Even if it’s legally OK, the move, made without informing the rest of the fire board, has destroyed Frazier’s trust in his fellow board members from Brentwood.

“I have no faith in them anymore,” Frazier said.

Brentwood’s decision to move now was based on the estimated 12 to 18 months it could take to create a new district through the Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees the creation of special districts. The process would include negotiating with the county for current fire tax revenue collected from Brentwood, creating a service plan and securing the additional revenue needed from Brentwood residents in order to finance its own district.

“They’re going to have to pay more either way,” union President Vince Wells said. “Why pay a few more dollars to (form a new district) when you can pay a few more dollars to keep this district? No matter which plan it is, it’s going to cost more money.”

Councilman Bob Brockman bristled at the suggestion that launching a Plan B meant Brentwood had given up all hope for the district, but at the same time he painted a less-than-rosy picture. “It’s foolish to think that we don’t want the best for the whole district,” he said. “I would prefer to save the whole district if it’s possible, but honestly, I don’t know if it is.”

Councilman Joel Bryant said he voted for the move because he had always been taught “If you don’t have a back-up plan, you don’t have a plan.” Still, he wants to try to keep the district whole.

“I don’t see what harm there is in getting everyone together, locking the door, bringing in some pizza, and hammering this out.”

Oakley Councilmember and fire board member Pat Anderson said Brentwood’s move “feels like an abandonment of the group process.” She thinks the ECCFPD might still be saved if a bridge loan can be arranged to keep it afloat for five years while a plan is put together to find permanent funding. Even if that were possible, she added, it would certainly be more difficult now that a political

split exists in the district.

Commissioner and Vice Mayor Kevin Romick said he also wishes Brentwood had waited, if only to bring the discussion to the full fire board for discussion prior to a sudden decision to pursue an opt-out plan. He said he has asked the issue be placed on the Oakley council agenda to determine his city's best course of action.

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