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Parcel tax for fire services in East Contra Costa headed to voters

By Rowena Coetsee
Contra Costa Times
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OAKLEY -- The East Contra Costa Fire District will ask voters to approve a \$197 parcel tax next year so the agency can add firefighters -- including paramedics -- to its six stations.

The eight directors present at Monday's meeting unanimously agreed to place the proposed tax on the June 5 ballot.

If the tax is approved, officials expect the roughly \$8.6 million in additional revenue to enable the financially strapped agency to expand its 43-man crew, hiring enough firefighters to put three on a shift at each station.

Currently, two of the six stations have only a pair of firefighters on duty at any time. None has firefighters with advanced life support training; the parcel tax would ensure that one paramedic would be on every engine.

Directors had been discussing a \$187 parcel tax with the goal of eventually reopening the two stations the district was forced to close last year, but after seeing five years' worth of budget projections, they acknowledged they needed to try for more money while scaling back their hopes.

Directors Steve Barr and Erick Stonebarger emphasized that the district must be realistic in telling taxpayers what they will be getting for their money.

East Contra Costa Fire is operating at a deficit and, barring some development, will exhaust its savings at some point in 2012-13.

That could happen sooner than later: The district had to reduce the property tax revenue it's counting on by about \$330,000 after the county reassessed real estate values downward this spring, an adjustment that fire Chief Hugh Henderson says will leave his agency with an ending fund balance in June of about \$480,000.

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That sum doesn't reflect any of the yet-to-be-determined costs the district will incur in getting the parcel tax on the ballot, he said.

If the district cannot persuade two-thirds of voters to pony up more money for protection, Henderson is projecting that the district will have to slash staffing levels in half and shutter more stations.

In a related matter, the board agreed to hire a political consultant to educate the public about what's at stake.

The district will pay San Francisco-based Ehrlich Campaigns up to \$120,000 to conduct the campaign, a figure that Director John Jewell initially questioned.

"I got a problem with these numbers," he said of the winning bid, which includes a monthly retainer fee of \$5,750.

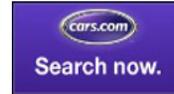
The consulting firm will organize at least two direct mailings to voters, assemble fact sheets, and help board members get their message across at public meetings.

One property owner who won't be a hard sell is Knightsen resident Carolyn Prince.

With four parcels, she's facing the prospect of shelling out more than \$700 more per year. Still, Prince said she appreciates the value of paramedics, and urged directors to put the tax to voters as soon as possible.

"I don't care (about the added cost) -- I want the protection," she said.

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