

Barnidge: Contra Costa residents sound the alarm over disappearing fire stations

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On Tuesday, when Fire Chief Daryl Louder explained the ramifications of the vote -- he anticipates closing stations in Lafayette, Clayton, Martinez and Walnut Creek next month and one or two more in 2013 -- attendees at the district's board meeting weren't doing any victory dances.

They heard Louder say that emergency response times would be slower and some services would be diminished. Mutual aid from neighboring communities would be needed more often, and lesser-trained reserve firefighters would see more action.

He told a packed house in the county supervisors' chamber that many factors were considered in pinpointing the closures that will cut expenses by \$3 million. He mentioned call volume, community risk, proximity of neighboring stations and transportation corridors.

Then members of the audience told him they didn't care about the rationale. Closing fire stations was a bad idea.

Eliminating the only fire station in Clayton is wholly unfair, Mayor Howard Geller said. "It can be devastating not only for safety but for future growth and the ability to attract home buyers or development in our city."

Shutting down Station 16 would leave Lafayette homeowners north of Highway 24 an additional four minutes from the nearest alternative, a resident said. In the case of a heart attack, "four minutes makes the difference between life and death."

A longtime Mountain View resident argued that Martinez Station 12 is indispensable, noting that her unincorporated community is adjacent to the Shell refinery.

"Our fire station is the first line of defense for more than just fires, of which we've had many over the years," she said, "even losing the lives of some of our friends, though they lived no more than three blocks from the station. Imagine the carnage if we were waiting another 10 minutes for emergency response."

The most compelling story belonged to Becky Hanson, a Clayton resident for 35 years, who said she would not be alive if not for quick response by firefighters at nearby Station 11.

One year ago, while recovering from back surgery, she suffered a painful fall down the stairs and inadvertently overdosed on prescription painkillers. When her husband was unable to awaken her, he called for help, and firefighters arrived three minutes later. She spent four days in intensive care.

"They told my husband if he had waited another minute, I would not be here today," she said.

But that wasn't the end of her tale. On Oct. 13, her house caught fire and would have burned to the ground without the efforts of firefighters from the same station now targeted for closure. She heard their sirens as soon as she called for help.

"I beseech you to try to find another solution," she told the supervisors.

The folks who took turns at the microphone weren't there to rail about pensions or unfunded liabilities. They were there out of concern for a safety net that's about to disappear.

Don't tell them the defeat of Measure Q was a victory.

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