

Contra Costa County supervisors vote to close four fire stations

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MARTINEZ -- After hours of debate, Contra Costa supervisors voted Tuesday to shutter four fire stations in Walnut Creek, Martinez, Lafayette and Clayton in an attempt to keep the county's financially struggling fire protection district afloat.

The four stations will go dark next month and save the district about \$3 million a year from its \$102.4 million annual budget.

Mayors, firefighters and concerned homeowners spoke out on all sides of the lengthy meeting, which lasted more than five hours, but in the end, the supervisors said they had no choice. The vote was 5-0.

"We have to close stations. It's not what we want to do," Supervisor Federal Glover said. "But we have to live within our means."

The drastic cuts would come more than a month after voters shot down the fire district's Measure Q, a seven-year parcel tax that would have raised enough money to keep the district's 28 stations open.

Contra Costa Fire Chief Daryl Louder explained that the stations selected for closure were picked taking into account response times, mutual aid availability and what would help the district's entire system maintain service. He added that ConFire would need to close an additional one or two stations by next fiscal year if no new revenue is found.

The district has left firefighter positions empty and has been covering shifts through overtime, and the station closures will not cause layoffs, Louder said.

The meeting was often contentious, with supervisors getting heated over what a future fire service should look like and how response times should be evaluated.

"I see this as a short-term decision to stop the bleeding," Supervisor John Gioia said. "We're not happy to have to make this decision, but this is what we must do."

Elderly speakers at the meeting expressed concern over increases in medical call response times and disaster coverage, particularly at the Shell refinery in Martinez near one of the stations identified for closure.

If closed, the stations would go dark in early January, and the fire district would work with the county's ambulance services to tweak coverage areas to make sure medical calls are still responded to in a safe manner.

Fire union President Vince Wells predicts the station closures will have a direct impact on public safety. He said he has already been in situations where crews arriving just a few minutes earlier might have prevented the spread of fire to neighboring homes.

"This is only going to add to that and increase response times even more," he said.

Representatives from Lafayette hoped to save their station by reducing their crews to two for each of their three stations. "It would give the district an opportunity to try this innovative approach on a limited basis," wrote Lafayette Mayor Mike Anderson, adding in his letter to the board that the city's property taxes provide about \$1.2 million over what it costs to run Lafayette stations. "Given ConFire's bleak long-term financial forecast, such a trial might prove valuable if and when the District is forced to down-staff in other communities."

Firefighters spoke out against the plan.

"With all due respect to the city of Lafayette, we're not supportive of a two-person engine company," union chief Wells said. "There are serious ramifications to the public and firefighters with that type of model."

Stations on the chopping block are:

- No. 4 on Hawthorne Drive in Walnut Creek, which leaves that city with three stations.
- No. 11 on Center Avenue in Clayton, the city's only fire station.
- No. 12 on Shell Avenue in Martinez, which would leave two Martinez stations.
- No. 16 on Los Arabis Drive in Lafayette, cutting that city's number of fire stations to two.

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