

Pittsburg: Forum focuses on adjusting fire district resources

By Eve Mitchell Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News

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PITTSBURG -- More than nine months after voters rejected a parcel tax that forced cutbacks in local fire protection services, residents had the opportunity Monday to weigh in on changes the Contra Costa Fire District is considering to cope with those reductions.

At the first of three scheduled town hall meetings Monday night, attendees heard about possible changes in the way district stations are staffed and other service delivery differences after budget cuts led to four stations closing, including one in Pittsburg.

The locations for the meetings are tied to where stations have closed since January after voters rejected a \$75 annual parcel tax in November that would have raised \$17 million over seven years to offset a drop in revenues linked to lower property taxes and higher health care and pension costs.

The county hired Missouri-based Fitch & Associates in December to analyze fire department and emergency services call volume and operations and to come up with recommendations for service delivery changes that would make better use of existing fire department resources. The idea behind the town hall meetings is to give residents an overview of the methodology being used for the study while providing residents with the opportunity to talk directly with consultants. Fitch is expected to release the study and specific recommendations in February 2014.

"We have not reached any conclusions at this point," Jim Broman, a senior consultant with Fitch, told more than two dozen people who attended the two-hour long meeting. "Change needs to happen."

Changes are needed because traditional 24-hour staffing of fire stations is not efficient and the district is facing a financial crisis, he said. Some 73 percent of the 82,000 calls last year were medical emergencies, with 27 percent fire-related, he said.

An example of a service delivery change would be to have fire trucks at strategic locations based on historical need rather than at a fire station 24 hours a day. Also under review is what level of services firefighters should provide when responding to emergency medical calls so that resources are not overused. The same calls are responded to by the county's emergency medical services agency through American Medical Response, the county's ambulance service provider.

Another one is peak-hour staffing.

"You could move those resources into (peak daytime hours) to make them more efficient," Broman said, adding that few calls come in during the early morning hours.

Also under consideration is increased consumer education such as educating seniors on steps they can take such as installing safety rails to help prevent falls in the home. "Some mitigation approaches are much cheaper than responses," he said.

Dorothy Miller questioned how much such education efforts would accomplish.

"There is so only so much education that people are going to pay attention to," she said.

Vince Wells, president of the United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County, Local 1230, said the study needs to look at call length and complexity involving fire responses.

"Those things don't show up in the dots," he said.

Broman said calls indeed vary and that is something the study will look at.

The county board of supervisors, which also acts as the board of directors for the fire district, will ultimately decide on whether to adopt the Fitch recommendations for new service delivery alternatives.

"How do you balance all that to make sure you have a sustainable system," asked Supervisor Federal Glover, whose district includes Pittsburg.

Supervisors will likely put on another parcel tax measure on the ballot to raise revenues for the fire district. "We're looking at it going out next year," he said.

But there are no guarantees voters will pass a parcel tax measure, which is why Fitch has been tasked with coming up with recommendations for the fire district.

ConFire has 23 stations that serve its territory, which includes Antioch, Clayton, Concord, Lafayette, Martinez, Pittsburg, Pleasant Hill, San Pablo and Walnut Creek and much of the central unincorporated area, including Bay Point.

In January, stations in Concord, Lafayette and Walnut Creek were closed, and Clayton was staffed part-time. One of Pittsburg's three stations closed in July.

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If you go

What: Contra Costa Fire District town hall meetings

When/Where: 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 20, at Veterans Memorial Building, 3780 Mt. Diablo Blvd. in Lafayette; 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 21, at the Clayton Community Library, 6125 Clayton Road.

Information: www.co.contra-costa.ca.us; www.cccounty.us/ConFireStudy