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Published July 17th, 2013

Burned-Out Fire District

By Nick Marnell

"I don't have enough revenue to do our job," said a weary Contra Costa County Fire Protection District chief Daryl Louder at the July 9 Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors meeting. Louder had just listened to a presentation by county administrator David Twa who said that, even with the recent closure of a fifth fire station, the district will be bankrupt in two fiscal years without an increase in revenue.

Despite the bleak financial report, Louder made three operational requests of the board: He asked for \$170,000 to staff three 2-person squads to respond to emergency medical calls during the height of the wildfire season; a reduction in automatic aid supplied outside the district; and authorization to renegotiate with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District on a joint fire station 46.

The station 46 consolidation plan was resurrected when the MOFD board voted to renegotiate with the owner of a parcel to be used for a joint fire station which would replace MOFD station 43 in Orinda and ConFire's closed station 16 in Lafayette. "My thanks to MOFD for looking at this once again despite our reluctance to enter into an agreement," said Supervisor Candace Andersen, whose district includes Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda.

Lafayette council member Don Tatzin and city manager Steven Falk also supported the revised ConFire station 46 plan. Though the city recently formed an Emergency Services Task Force to investigate alternative delivery of its fire and emergency medical service, "Lafayette has no appetite for changing fire districts," said Falk.

Louder's new proposal for the fire station 46 consolidation included a major caveat: that MOFD waive ConFire's portion of the annual operating costs until ConFire's financial situation stabilizes; he said he will request a five-year waiver period. "I think it's a good proposal," said Twa. So did the supervisors, who unanimously passed a motion to allow the chief to renegotiate the deal.

As to whether MOFD also thinks it is a good proposal, board president John Wyro had no comment as he had not seen the new ConFire presentation.

The supervisors unanimously passed a motion to add the three emergency medical squads from mid-July through mid-October, over the objection of the firefighters' union. Vince Wells, president of Local 1230, wanted the money used to reopen ConFire station 87 in Pittsburg, which closed July 8.

Though no motion was passed, the directors also agreed with Louder's proposal that automatic aid to neighboring fire districts be restricted to a hard cap of four ConFire units at one time, with a maximum of two units deployed into any one district at a time.

MOFD fire chief Randall Bradley did not think that this restriction will adversely impact his district. "We have five engines and two ambulances," he said later that day. "With an additional two engines from Lafayette we can handle over 99 percent of our calls. If we need additional resources we can get them from Berkeley and/or Oakland."

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