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## Fire District Faces Serious Financial Pain

By Cathy Tyson



Fire fighters leaving the Board of Supervisors meeting Photo Cathy Tyson

In a letter to the Lafayette Homeowners Council, Louder said the District has reduced expenditures by over \$6 million by eliminating 15 positions, controlling overtime, deferring capital purchases and improvements and eliminating entire programs. The International Association of Firefighters Local 1230 has deferred awarded raises until the 2011/2012 fiscal year. The cuts account for less than a 7% reduction in the total \$94,479,673 budget for fiscal year 2010/2011.

"The department is trying to improve efficiency and effectiveness," said Louder. "It's a dynamic situation - we are trying to maintain adequate coverage," adding that neighboring communities, notably the Moraga Orinda Fire District, will provide mutual aid if a call comes in closer to one of their stations.

Although the new Chief came to simply introduce himself at the September 27 Lafayette City Council Meeting, he received a number of pointed questions about potential station brown outs in Lafayette. Residents were concerned about one of the three stations in town closing, criteria for brown outs, and specifics regarding District finances.

Resident and municipal employee Brian Smith said, "It gets pretty frustrating and overwhelming pretty quick," explaining that civic workers are giving back 6% - 7% salary and have furlough days. "I hope firefighters can make sacrifices like we do."

At a Board of Supervisors meeting the next day, Supervisor Susan Bonilla summarized the problem, "We realize we are facing a crisis here. We can all agree we'd rather not make these choices - property taxes are going down - the consequence is that revenue decreased. We have to figure out the value of safety - what we're willing to spend." To that end the Supervisors will be looking into a parcel tax for future funding.

For now there are no Lafayette fire station closures or brown outs. The Board of Supervisors did approve a contingency funding plan that uses \$8.7 million in reserves and deferred \$4 million in workers compensation. They will be scheduling a Board workshop to discuss options and strongly advocated for a dialogue between residents and the District about budget realities.

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"Service delivery modification" - these three little words are the end result of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District's staggering \$12 million shortfall for the 2010/2011 fiscal year. "We simply don't have enough money in the budget to continue the same level of service," said Fire Chief Daryl Louder.

The Contra Costa Fire Protection District (District) serves 600,000 people via 30 fire stations in a 300 plus mile area from Antioch to Lafayette to Clayton and beyond. Approximately 70% of the District's 44,600 calls for service in 2009 were for emergency medical service.

The ugly truth is that without additional revenue, "There will be draconian cuts to fire service," said Louder, addressing the Board of Supervisors at a recent meeting. With 88% of the District's budget coming from steadily decreasing property taxes across the county - something's got to give.

Reserves are expected to be completely gone by next year. Having cut staff and expenditures as much as possible, the Chief believes the only other option is to reduce personnel which accounts for 85% of the District budget.