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Fire Chief Warns of Possible Fire Station Closures

By Cathy Tyson



Station 16, at risk of closure Photo Cathy Tyson

and 6. In his presentation to the County Board of Supervisors, Louder described the criteria for identifying fire station closure: Hazards and risks to the community are on the top of the list. This includes wildland/urban interface, refineries and chemical plants, railroads and freeways along with high rise and commercial buildings. However other considerations are also taken into account, like the probability of fire, call volume and the ability of surrounding stations to absorb calls.

Although it sounds rather odd, the District is already planning to close half of a Walnut Creek station by January 1. That station has two crews of three firefighters at all times. Pending Board approval, staffing will go down to a single crew.

Supervisors decided to hire a polling firm to gauge interest in a possible parcel tax to avoid service reductions. While its clear Lafayette residents value their fire stations - it's unclear if the balance of county residents in these tough economic times will feel the same way.

Despite \$6 million in reduced expenditures by managing vacancies, controlling overtime, deferring raises, eliminating 15 positions and more - the District will deplete its reserve account in fiscal year 2011- 2012.

Adding to already ugly budget picture is an additional \$6 million pension payment due next year as well as already agreed upon 2.5 percent raises in July, 2011 and January 2012 for firefighters that were deferred from the prior fiscal year.

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Without a parcel tax next year, up to eight fire stations could close said Fire Chief Daryl Louder at a recent Board of Supervisors workshop, due to a projected \$12 million budget shortfall for fiscal year 2010/2011.

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Calling a parcel tax "crucial to the survival of the District," Louder explained the dire financial straights of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District (CCCFPD). Funded primarily through property tax assessments, due to the decline of the housing market that revenue has decreased by almost 12% since 2007. Having already cut back on administrative expenses, the largest portion of the budget, 85%, is salaries and benefits. "The only methodology available to achieve savings and balance the budget is to further reduce personnel costs," noted a county staff report.

Although no final decisions were made at the recent workshop, the chief did single out several stations for possible closure: Lafayette Station 16 (Los Arabis), Martinez Station 12 and Concord Stations 22