

Los Arabis Station Set to Close in January

By Cathy Tyson



Off-duty firefighters packed the County Board of Supervisors auditorium to hear the final decision on station closures. Photo C. Tyson

The Board of Supervisors knew this moment would come when Proposition Q failed to garner the necessary 66 percent of votes to pass a seven-year, \$75 per parcel tax to help fund Contra Costa Fire Protection District (Con Fire). The board voted Dec. 11 to close four fire stations—the Los Arabis station in Lafayette, along with stations in Walnut Creek, Clayton and Martinez. Closing these facilities in January will save approximately \$3 million, according to Fire Chief Daryl Louder.

In a nutshell, Louder said that reserve funds have been tapped out and there is not enough money to keep all of Con Fire's stations open for business. Prior to the November election, he warned that this would be the consequence if measure Q wasn't passed. Part of Con Fire's troubling financial picture stems from its primary funding source—property tax revenue has declined by \$32 million dollars over the past four years. Add in rising pension and health insurance costs, and the situation becomes untenable. Personnel costs account for 85 percent of the \$102 million budget for fiscal year 2012-2013.

Steps have been taken to trim expenses where possible, employees took a 10 percent salary reduction, and some positions have been eliminated. "We already have a very lean system," said Louder, "and we've continued to work on structural reform." The Fire Chief's Budget Narrative in the official 2012-2013 budget paints a dire picture: "We currently project a \$16 million deficit for FY 2013-2014 and \$19 million deficit in FY 2014-2015 and FY 2015-2016. It would require closing a third of our fire stations to offset the deficit."

Lamorinda residents are particularly concerned about the Los Arabis station in Happy Valley. Firefighters moved out in June, due to mold and rodent intrusion. Those firefighters are now housed at another station about a mile away. Addressing the supervisors, Louder explained in a very businesslike manner why these stations were selected, based on a range of cri-

teria including call volume and the ability of adjoining fire stations to "absorb" the call volume and work load. "Obviously this is a very difficult time, we've worked hard to avoid coming to this point," said Louder. Lafayette is left with two fire stations—Station 15 on Mt. Diablo Boulevard, and Station 17 in Burton Valley.

Members of the public along with city officials from the affected areas were present to convey how unhappy their constituents are. Rob Schroder, the mayor of Martinez said, "This is not going to solve the problem in the long run." Calling Measure Q a "seven year band-aid," Clayton mayor Howard Geller pointed out that he hasn't heard how the funding issue will be fixed, and called the Clayton station closure "an inequitable hit;" he hinted at possible litigation. Closing Fire Station 11 would leave Clayton without a fire station within city limits.

In one possible adjustment to service, since the vast majority of calls are medical in nature, Louder said he would consider staffing stations with less expensive paramedics or emergency medical technicians. Firefighter Union President Vince Wells wasn't thrilled, saying EMT costs shouldn't come out of the fire district budget, rather from American Medical Response — the county's ambulance provider.

Public speakers from Lafayette suggested reducing personnel down to two for each of the city's three stations. Mayor Mike Anderson called the downsizing "an opportunity to try this innovative approach on a limited basis," and pointed out that of the many communities within Contra Costa County that Con Fire serves, Lafayette's property tax contribution injects approximately \$1.2 million more than it actually costs to run the three stations here. Citing safety concerns for firefighters and the public, Wells was not supportive of the suggestion. After many long hours of passionate commentary, all five supervisors said they had no other option and voted unanimously to close the four fire stations.



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