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ConFire Meets Unhappy Lafayette Residents Station 16 remains closed

By David Killam

In a packed public meeting held Jan. 15 at the Veterans Memorial Building, Contra Costa Fire Protection District Chief Daryl Louder explained to residents and officials why it was necessary to close Fire Station 16 on Los Arabis Drive in Lafayette.

Chief Louder listed several reasons why the station had to close. Among them were: a \$32 million decline in county property tax receipts, which fund the fire district; and the low-volume nature of the station without "community threats," such as pipelines or manufacturing facilities. The ability of other nearby stations to absorb the station's workload and available "good transportation corridors" were two other reasons for the station's closure.

Reaction in the meeting was mixed. One resident wondered if the station could be saved if community volunteers rebuilt it-Louder explained that almost 90 percent of the cost of operating the fire station was in salary and benefits for firefighters.

Another resident wondered about reimbursement for ambulance transport of medical emergencies. Currently the district pays for the cost of ambulance transport and will study ways in which to acquire reimbursement, according to Louder.

One resident wondered if it would be cost effective for Lafayette to merge with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. Lou Ann Texeira, who sits on the board of directors of the Local Area Formation Commission (LAFCO), responded that the process of doing so would be expensive and time-consuming. LAFCO was established by the California legislature to oversee municipal annexations and special district formations.

Another Lafayette citizen wondered if switching to eight hour shifts for firefighters instead of the current 24-hours-on and 48-hours-off would save any money-

Louder explained that that type of configuration would actually be more expensive.

Louder answered some residents' concerns by explaining that firefighters would be temporarily deployed in densely wooded areas during "red flag" days - which usually happen at the end of summer when conditions are very dry. Defined benefit compensation for active and retired firefighters has proven to be unaffordable to some communities. ConFire, with approximately 230 employees and 30 retirees, has an unfunded liability of a whopping \$130,737,000 for pensions and health care coverage. New hires since January of this year contribute to their own pension, with a 9 percent contribution from the district. Louder feels that the amount of the liability may decrease when the economy improves and better returns are received on county investments.

"We need to continue to find ways to reduce our personnel costs, which take up close to 90 percent of our budget," said County Supervisor Candace Andersen, who attended the meeting. "Although the pensions of existing firefighters are vested and cannot be modified, that is not the case for new hires. The governor's pension reform has helped, but there is more we will need to do to lower the employee expenses. I would also like to see us expanding our use of volunteers or 'Reserves' to supplement firefighters. Our Deputy Sheriff Reserve program is very successful in this county with volunteer reserves working side by side with professionals to keep our community safe. I'd like to see our Fire Reserves program grow using a similar model."

"There is a way that could work," said Louder. "People visualize volunteers working in a small community with low-volume stations. The standard now for firefighters is much more demanding. The volunteer firefighters will have to have the same training as career firefighters do. They still have to go through physical exams and background checks. I just don't want people to think that all you do is put out an announcement, people show up and the next day they're riding a rig."

One resident suggested that Measure Q, which was on the ballot to provide funds for the fire district and failed, be placed again on the ballot. He suggested that the publicity for the measure had been poor and the measure was confusing.

In the meantime, the district has enacted 10 percent pay cuts, has laid off a few people and has kept a few vacancies open.

In addition to Station 16, ConFire will close fire stations in Walnut Creek and Martinez, and reduce service at the Clayton station.

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