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Public Forum Council Edges Back Toward Fire

Almost immediately after the city incorporated forty five years ago, the Lafayette City Council had a big decision to make: whether to run its own fire department or turn it over to the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. To inform the decision, the Council appointed a Citizens Fire Protection Study Commission which, after a lot of work, recommended that fire services be turned over to ConFire. The rationale was that a regional approach would deliver better coordinated responses, economies of scale, clear communications, improved training, and lower administrative costs. And so it was that, in November and December 1968, the Board of Supervisors and the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) approved Lafayette's request for the annexation. Effective January 1, 1969, Lafayette's three fire stations, all of the equipment inside those stations, and each of the thirty-nine Lafayette firefighters were transferred to ConFire. The arrangement worked well for decades, with ConFire delivering excellent fire and EMS services to Lafayette's residents via those same three stations.

Well, as that old Bob Dylan lyric says, "things have changed." During the last five years, as the Great Recession chewed its grinding course through Contra Costa's communities, ConFire simultaneously saw its property tax revenues plunge and its pension obligations rise. The result was a big budget hole. Since you "cain't plug a hole with nothin'", last November ConFire asked voters for more revenue. The tax measure, however, required the ever-difficult supermajority for approval, and voters didn't go for it. Even in affluent, fire-challenged Lafayette, only 50.7% of the voters checked the yes box, and that was way, way short of the 66.7% threshold. The result? ConFire did exactly what it said it would do: it closed four fire stations, including Station 16 in western Lafayette, leaving hundreds of residents without decent fire / EMS protection from the district they pay taxes to.

Very soon after that closure, with the nearby Moraga Orinda Fire District recognizing that it faced similar budget challenges, the fire chiefs from the two districts began exploring the prospect of a single jointly-funded station at or near the Lafayette/Orinda borderline. The theory was that, by co-funding a single station, rather than two stations, each district would save more than \$1M annually while delivering pretty much the same level of service to all those who live in the coverage area. Fortuitously and somewhat unbelievably, a large parcel that lies exactly on the border of the two cities, in exactly the right place along El Nido Ranch Road, happened to be for sale, and the owner agreed to cooperate with the fire chiefs. It seemed too good to be true: an innovative, money-saving public safety consolidation that could be implemented relatively rapidly with almost no impact on service levels.

Alas, it was too good to be true. A few weeks ago, after looking once again at its black financial picture, ConFire closed a fifth station - this one in Pittsburg - and said that it will likely close a sixth sometime early next year. These new closures, combined with the four earlier closures, leave thousands of ConFire constituents with substandard protection. The situation is now so bad that ConFire Chief Daryl Louder said, "I have serious doubts about our ability to provide protection for our community and I have serious concerns about the safety of our personnel operating out there."

With that as a backdrop, the Board of Supervisors had no stomach to commit the ~\$1M that would be needed annually to fund the consolidated MOFD/Lafayette station. "If Station 16 were (still) open and we were certain it was going to remain open, this type of arrangement makes a lot of sense," said Supervisor John Gioia. "But right now ... it's \$1 million more in operational costs a year than what we are spending, at a time when we're going to have on our plate potential other cuts." When it came down to the vote, the supervisors turned down the consolidation idea on a 4-1 vote, with only Supervisor Candace Anderson supporting the jointly operated station.

This is not good for Lafayette residents, particularly those who live in western Lafayette. But what particularly rankles is that Lafayette taxpayers may now be receiving significantly fewer services than they pay for. According to Jackie Lorrekovich, ConFire's Chief of Administrative Services, there are nineteen "tax rate areas" in Lafayette that deliver about \$7.8M to ConFire's general operating fund annually. Meanwhile, Jackie's estimate of the cost to run a fire station for a year is \$2.5M to \$2.7M. Thus, when ConFire was operating three stations in Lafayette, residents were getting services roughly equal to the taxes they paid. Now, however, it looks like Lafayette may be subsidizing the rest of the County by perhaps \$2M annually while receiving degraded service levels.

If the Board of Supervisors had taken a favorable view toward the consolidated station and agreed to transfer, annually, the \$1M needed to make that happen, the issue of the subsidy might never have arisen. But, once the supervisors rejected the idea, the matter was bound to find its way on to the Lafayette City Councilmembers' agenda. It did, last week, and to say the councilmembers weren't pleased would be an understatement. After some discussion, they directed Councilmembers Brandt Andersson and Traci Reilly to meet with the LAFCO Executive Director to learn about the process for detaching fire services from the County, and to meet with MOFD board members and develop a set of dealpoints for a fire annexation. Andersson and Reilly have already done that, and also met with Vince Wells, the president of the firefighter's union. The two councilmembers are expected to relay what they have learned to the full Council at its meeting on the evening of June 10th.

To say, at this point, that a detachment from ConFire is imminent, definite, or even likely, would be completely incorrect. The City Council is clearly and only in the earliest stage of the fact finding process. That said, however, there hasn't been a discussion quite like this in, well, forty-five years.

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