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If at First You Don't Succeed...

By Nick Marnell

At a sparsely attended town hall meeting Aug. 20, firefighters, public officials and Lafayette residents listened to a presentation by Fitch and Associates, a fire and emergency medical service consulting firm, on the state of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. Jim Broman, the Fitch representative, succinctly summed up the district's plight. "The model is not sustainable," he said.

The fire district suffered revenue losses of nearly \$32 million between 2008 and 2012 thanks to a drop in property tax revenue. But expenses continued to rise, especially district pension and health care costs. Measure Q, a ballot initiative proposing a parcel tax that would have brought the district \$17 million a year, was defeated in November 2012. ConFire responded by destaffing seven engine companies and closing five fire stations, including station 16 in Lafayette. Fitch was hired to assess alternative models of providing fire and emergency medical services to the district.

Though the revenue shortfall was the gorilla in the meeting room, Broman did indicate that there may be some area for improvement in district operations. His slide show depicted an example of an alternative deployment system, using a staffing model based upon peak service demand. But Broman stressed that Fitch had not come up with a final analysis; the project was only one-third complete. "We did not come tonight to give you the answers," he said. He then fielded audience questions.

"Should ConFire be broken up, and Lafayette join the Moraga-Orinda Fire District?" That dynamic is not part of this study, said Broman.

"Can fire service be funded by a combination of taxes and user fees?" Broman stressed that the key issue with user fees is the low, 55 percent collection rate.

"There is a huge revenue inequity in the district. Lafayette pays too much!" Broman blamed Proposition 13. "That's what caused the inequity, and ConFire cannot solve it," he said.

"Are you looking at how the district is run?" That has been raised a number of times, noted Broman. "Yes, governance will be addressed," he said.

"Will any recommendations not require any additional funding?" Fitch may find some efficiencies, he said, but there is not enough revenue to operate at the level that the community expects.

Addressing the revenue problem, Supervisor Candace Andersen spoke about the possibility that the county will place an initiative similar to Measure Q on the ballot in 2014. She was asked by Lafayette resident Jim Cunha why Measure Q failed in the first place.

"Why exactly was it turned down?" he said. "Are you going to poll residents and ask if they would now support this?"

If you're going to try this again, will you use consultants to determine where the public stands today?" Another

speaker suggested forming a community outreach group to help strategize the campaign for a new parcel tax.

In fiscal year 2014-15, district pension costs will rise to \$23 million, \$9 million over the prior year. Something more than a tweaking of district operations will be needed to cover that expense increase.

The Fitch and Associates study may be a critical component of a county strategy to convince district residents that more of their help is needed.

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