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## Breaking Up Is Hard To Do

*By Nick Marnell*

The nascent Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force is discovering that the questions are far more complicated than it may have realized.

In June, frustrated with the performance of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, the city of Lafayette formed the task force to assess alternative delivery of fire and emergency medical service to its residents. The precipitating event was seemingly the January closure of fire station 16 in northeast Lafayette, with city residents nonetheless on the hook for the full amount of the property tax allocation to ConFire.

"One-third of the city has no fire service, and that is unacceptable," said Councilmember Brandt Andersson who, along with Councilmember Traci Reilly, co-chairs the task force that includes an additional six volunteer Lafayette residents.

At the first task force meeting three study groups were formed. The fire and medical services group was to investigate the various availabilities of fire service, including partnerships with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, ConFire or another entity. The finance group was to evaluate the long-term financial sustainability of MOFD and ConFire, and what amount of tax revenue Lafayette needs to allocate to fire service. And the process and politics group would determine what the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission requires of Lafayette to detach from ConFire, and the actual process for doing so.

The task force at its next meeting unanimously adopted its so-called Problem Statement: "What fire and emergency medical services do people need? How much are they willing to pay? Are those services financially sustainable?"

The first committee reports poured in at the Sept. 17 task force meeting. And the session concluded with only more unanswered questions, mostly regarding a fire partner and the ubiquitous public pension issue.

"There needs to be some means in place to deal with this unfunded pension liability," said Andersson. Should the city detach from ConFire, a method must be worked out with the county to allocate Lafayette's pro-rated share of the district's unfunded pension liability, which looms at more than \$400 million. "We need to go anywhere and meet with anybody to try to solve this problem," said finance group member Jim Cunha.

In terms of the structure of the new Lafayette fire service, sentiment seemed to favor a contract model. "That way we'll fund our fair share for fire service; we'll pay only what we contract for," said Cunha.

Lafayette is not unfamiliar with public safety contracts; its police protection is provided on a contract basis by the county sheriff's office.

"If we do go the contract route, who will we contract with?" asked Reilly. Possible partners mentioned by the fire and medical services group were MOFD, Cal Fire, the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District and ConFire.

Outgoing ConFire Chief Daryl Louder indicated that he'd be amenable to serving Lafayette on a contract basis; that decision, however, rests with the county Board of Supervisors. "It makes for a cleaner system," he said.

As it is early in the potential detachment process, there was nothing new to report from the process and politics group.

With all of the possibilities for delivering fire and emergency medical service, and the many unanswered questions that have ensued, it is becoming evident that the spinning off of a subsidiary from its parent company in the public sector is an extremely elaborate and complex process.

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