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Commitment to Lafayette Reaffirmed

By *Nick Marnell*

Jeff Carman was never obsessed with being a fire chief.

"I was always operations oriented," said the new chief of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, who worked for the Roseville Fire Department since 1984. "We were making big strides in operations, and I was going to retire as a battalion chief."

But he was promoted to assistant chief of operations in 2010 - "kicking and screaming," he said - and he began to look at fire issues more globally. It was only recently that he felt the desire to become a fire chief. He started to look around; "I didn't want to be a fire chief just anywhere," he said.

Carman's industry friends told him that there were a lot of easier jobs available than the one he took with ConFire. He explained why he did.

"Relations between labor and management are good," he said. "The people here are great, and they truly do a good job. And the citizens love their fire department."

His main goal is to make the district sustainable - "to deliver the best service to our customers with the money that we have." Another goal is to market the fire district: "We need to let people know exactly what our firefighters do. 'This is what you're getting for \$95 million a year.'" As part of his marketing plan, he said that he intends to escalate the district's presence at city council meetings and at civic functions.

The biggest surprise in his first month on the job? "I knew ConFire was busy, but I didn't realize how busy," he said. But he was also surprised at what he heard at his first Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force meeting. The task force - charged with investigating alternative delivery of fire and emergency services to Lafayette - "was already down the road, looking at other fire agencies to come in and to get rid of ConFire. And that bothers me," he said. "It's emotional that we closed a fire station, but do we really know what level of service has dropped? Or, was there even a service drop? No one has taken a hard look at that data," he said. "We closed (Lafayette station 16) for funding reasons but also because it's uninhabitable. In the station's current condition, we couldn't put a company back there if we wanted to."

The chief said that he is "100 percent behind station 46," the proposed joint fire station venture at the Orinda-Lafayette border between the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and possibly ConFire. He is in talks with MOFD, but neither district has sufficient capital to fund the project right now, he said. Still, he is looking at all angles.

"What if we sold our current station (16) site?" he said. "We're looking at liquidating properties that we own to make this happen, even asking for a loan. We're serious."

Carman's message to Lafayette is one of commitment; a commitment to provide the city with the best possible fire and emergency service. He is aware, though, that the city feels it is not getting the service from the district that it pays for.

"If the cities want more say in how the district provides service, they should seek a governance change. The current system doesn't allow for city input," he said. "Maybe a new governance model would allow that."

"At least, I want to make Lafayette understand fully what we are doing and why we are doing it."

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