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Lamorinda Fire News Briefs

By Nick Marnell

Triage for the Med Squad

In September, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District placed into temporary service a two-person squad car to respond to low-level medical emergencies, freeing up firefighters and engines to tackle more serious fire and emergency incidents. The unit was deployed at ConFire station 1 in Walnut Creek, midway between two closed district stations: Walnut Creek station 4 and Lafayette station 16. Fire chief Jeff Carman requested at the Dec. 3 Board of Supervisors meeting that the medical squad program be extended.

"The stats up until day 60 were inconsistent," said Carman, reporting on the data from the trial period. "I will make some operational adjustments to the squad allowing them to run even more medical calls than what they did the first 90 days, and by doing this consistently for the next 90 days we can gather even more conclusive data."

Supervisor Mary Piepho asked the chief to add a report on the public perception of a tricked-out pickup truck responding to medical calls. "They're used to seeing ambulances used in emergency response and they're used to seeing a fire truck at an emergency response," she said. "How is the public reacting to this?"

The \$170,000 expense for an additional 90-day trial period was unanimously approved by the supervisors.

Fitch Report Update

Also at the Dec. 3 Board of Supervisors meeting, Fitch and Associates, LLC, a fire and medical service consulting firm, provided an interim report on the company's comprehensive study of the operations of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. The study was commissioned by the board in February, to investigate alternative delivery models of fire and emergency medical service. The district has struggled through years of property tax revenue shortfalls, and has plowed through its reserve funds and closed fire stations to remain in operation. Consultant Guillermo Fuentes conducted the two-hour presentation, which was peppered with charts, graphs and slide after slide of data, covering funding, call distribution, response times, and risk/reward analysis. Its conclusion restated the meme that has circulated throughout the district for years: ConFire needs to pursue alternative funding sources and reinvest in capital.

Fitch representative Jim Broman, a former fire chief, summed up the district's plight. "ConFire is under resourced," he said. "Even before the station closings you were very, very lean. And you've had to marginalize that even further." While short on offering solutions for revenue generation, the Fitch study presented three operational options to the district: keep its current staffing model, deploy a combination of two- and three-person units, or introduce EMS-specific personnel into the system. Regardless which model is chosen, the study projects that ConFire will be sustainable only until 2017.

"It would be nice if we could run a fire department on statistics alone," said Carman. "But it's not that simple." Carman has formed a committee of labor and management to look at every aspect of the ConFire organization. "We'll go back to the drawing board and build our organization using 23 companies," he said. "The bottom line is, that we will have to operate with some stations closed all or part of the time, because we simply can't afford to operate all of the stations until our revenue improves."

"We're having to deal with what's being presented to us, not with what we'd like," said supervisor Karen Mitchoff. "The report paints a picture; it gives us options. But the Fitch Report does not solve our problems."

The company plans to fine tune the report and release the first draft to the public Jan. 10.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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