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One Thousand Dollars A Page

By Nick Marnell

One year ago the Board of Supervisors commissioned Fitch and Associates, a Missouri-based fire consulting company, to determine optimal fire and emergency medical service response within the struggling Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. Frustrated residents and equally frustrated politicians provided feedback on the final draft of the company's report at a public meeting Jan. 22. Fitch consultant Jim Broman outlined ConFire's structural deficit, caused by expenses exceeding revenue coupled with a dependency on reserve funds since 2009. The report showed that even based on positive financial forecasts, the district will survive through only fiscal year 2016-17, after which its reserves will have been depleted. It was pointed out in the public comments portion of the meeting, however, that the basis upon which those forecasts were made - a 5 percent annual growth in revenue and 1 percent growth in expenses - seemed unrealistic.

But Fitch's task was to determine what could be done with the hand that ConFire has been dealt. The study recommended that the district take two, three-person, engine companies out of service and convert them to three, two-person, Quick Response Vehicle companies. The district implemented a QRV pilot program in the fall, to handle low-level EMS calls in a smaller, more flexible vehicle, allowing the fire engines to respond to larger emergencies. The report said that this change will allow ConFire to survive over the next three years under the current revenue structure, with no layoffs and even the possibility of opening some of the closed stations.

"Our work was to show you how to manage through the next two to three years, when there will be a need for a tax initiative," said Broman.

"For this, we paid a thousand dollars a page?" said Bill Granados, Lafayette's fire commissioner, referring to the \$170,000 cost of the 150-page document. He said he was frustrated with the lack of ideas for revenue generation and he was vehemently opposed to Fitch's staffing recommendation.

District 2 Supervisor Candace Andersen disputed the \$150,000 that Fitch claimed was the price to purchase a QRV; it was nearly triple what her research showed to be the case. A Fitch consultant responded that the vehicles would have additional limited firefighting duty, and the cost estimate included the upgrades necessary to do that.

The report suggested that fire response times could be reduced by up to two minutes, blaming the performance on a cumbersome dispatch process and the slow turnout of fire crews from the stations.

Andersen asked for assurance from fire chief Jeff Carman that he planned to improve those numbers. "We are taking a fresh look at all of our operations," said Carman. "There are definitely some efficiencies that we can gain." That includes resolving why fire responses take longer than EMS responses, he said. "You'd think that a fire response would be faster," said Andersen.

Supervisor Mary Piepho reflected both the praise and caution expressed by the board over the study. "This report is a tremendous starting point," she said. "But we have a lot of work to do."

The final version of the Fitch Report will be presented to the supervisors on Feb. 25.

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[back](#)

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