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Lafayette Council All In for Station 46

By Nick Marnell

Throughout its 12 months of existence, the Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force has struggled with the subtleties and the complexity of the fire protection industry. But in May, the task force took a major step forward: it agreed to endorse and support the construction and operation of fire station 46; and the Lafayette City Council concurred.

When the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors closed Lafayette's fire station 16 and refused to commit to the joint venture between ConFire and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District to build and operate station 46, the Lafayette City Council formed the task force to investigate alternate delivery of fire and emergency medical service to the city.

The task force, co-chaired by Council Members Traci Reilly and Brandt Andersson, evaluated a range of options, including funding its own service, contracting for service with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, merging with another district and even contracting back with ConFire. At a task force meeting in March, ConFire chief Jeff Carman asked that the task force stop talking secession and indicate if it was serious about station 46 as an option; he did not want to present a revised plan for station 46 to his board while at the same time the board was reading that Lafayette had one foot out the door.

In May, Alan Hartford, assistant chief of operations, unveiled to the task force the ConFire internal Strategic Planning Group, charged with evaluating the operation of the district on all levels, including standards of cover, finances and public outreach. Hartford also said that the district planned to take its risk-based deployment model to an entirely new level, based partly on pitching for the county's ambulance contract now held by American Medical Response.

Since ConFire does not know the deployment model of AMR's ambulances, it cannot tailor custom responses to medical calls. If it controlled the ambulance deployment, explained Hartford, then the district could keep its fire resources where it feels they are needed and deploy medical resources to ensure adequate coverage for medical emergencies without compromising the fire response. "We have no way of doing that right now," he said. "If we had the ambulance contract we would know where our resources are and then can move them around accordingly."

"Hartford's address calmed nerves in the room," said Reilly, who emphasized that the committee was impressed by how rapidly ConFire is working to fix its problems. The task force presented a resolution supporting the concept of station 46 to the City Council, which unanimously approved it on May 27.

Acknowledging that station 46 would be a huge step in the right direction, Reilly cautioned that there are still areas that need to be addressed. One of those problem areas was highlighted in a letter sent to the city council by task force member Jim Cunha.

"This motion does not solve all of our problems," he wrote. "Firefighter pensions and post retirement medical benefits are still to be solved before we are anywhere close to where we need to be on a sustained basis."

Carman plans to present his revised station 46 strategy - along with the formal support of Lafayette - to the Board of Supervisors this month. MOFD chief Stephen Healy is expected to make a similar presentation to his board shortly.

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[back](#)

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