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Lafayette Task Force Imposes Its Will

By Nick Marnell

Service on a government task force often goes unnoticed and unrewarded. But a task force created by the city of Lafayette exacted its own notice at the county governing level, and the residents of Contra Costa County may soon be rewarded because of its efforts.

When the Board of Supervisors closed Lafayette's station 16 of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, the city formed an Emergency Services Task Force to investigate alternative delivery of fire and emergency medical service to its residents. After months of deliberation, the task force agreed to support station 46, a joint venture at the Lafayette-Orinda border between ConFire and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. During a discussion of the Lafayette ambulance service that would be provided out of the new station - to be staffed by MOFD personnel - the complexities of ambulance exclusive operating areas arose.

In 2013 ConFire captain Gil Caravantes responded to an emergency medical call in Lafayette, and based on his analysis at the scene, Caravantes requested mutual aid from MOFD to transport the patient to the hospital. His action violated the contract between Contra Costa County and its ambulance provider, American Medical Response, in part because AMR holds the exclusive right to provide ambulance service in Lafayette.

Task force member Jim Cunha spoke of the need to change that section of the county ambulance contract, portions of which are available for competitive bid this year. "Station 46 should be able to be dispatched to medical calls in Lafayette," he said. "Include in the (request for proposal) the ability of the new ambulance vendor to be allowed to cross district boundaries."

The task force agreed, notified the county EMS director in October and submitted to the Board of Supervisors the following revised paragraph for the county ambulance RFP draft: "In the interest of getting the quickest ambulance to the patient, (the Local Emergency Medical Services Agency) requires the Contractor to make a good faith effort to execute a satisfactory mutual aid agreement with the agencies responding from a neighboring jurisdiction. LEMSA will approve an appropriately structured agreement to use the closer ambulances."

"(The Caravantes) situation is the very scenario that this paragraph is attempting to address," said Ben Smith, ConFire battalion chief, EMS division.

Co-chair Brandt Andersson further explained the rationale behind the task force action. "I think that it is just common sense and something that public safety agencies do as a matter of course," he said. "We wanted to be sure that if the contract is won by a for-profit entity, that they would be held to the same standard of safety first, profit second."

"It is our contention that patients' lives are more important than invisible borders that separate fire districts," added co-chair Traci Reilly.

The supervisors unanimously approved the RFP, including the task force changes, on Jan. 13. The RFP went to the California EMS Authority for approval, and unless it determines the need for substantive changes in the document, bidding for the available portions of the county ambulance contract is expected to begin by April.

The contract will be awarded by the Board of Supervisors, which is also the governing body of ConFire, a likely bidder for that contract. Sharon Anderson, county counsel, issued a report which states that the board is not precluded from considering the district's bid just because it serves as the governing body of both entities.

"We are cognizant of the risks as to being both boards," said Supervisor Candace Andersen. "That is why we've requested an independent financial analysis of each bid as well as the hiring of two independent observers. We are committed to providing the highest level of emergency medical service at the best price."

And as implored by the Lafayette task force, to provide emergency medical service that embodies a standard of public safety over profit.

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