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## Better Year Ahead for ConFire

*By Nick Marnell*

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District chief Jeff Carman warned his advisory fire commission in February about the precarious situation the district was in. "We're at a tipping point," he said. Carman explained that the district did not have enough apparatus to keep all of the companies in service. Fire stations were starting to crumble; Lafayette's station 17 was closed for two weeks in late March while a main water line was repaired. Equipment was failing. Firefighters needed additional training. "For the number of fires our firefighters fight, they should not be doing it without proper equipment," said the chief, who confronted many of these district deficiencies head-on when he constructed the ConFire 2015-16 fiscal year budget.

Personifying his ailing district, Carman fought through cold symptoms as he presented the budget to the Board of Supervisors at its April 14 meeting. ConFire will pay \$1 million next year as part of a 10-year lease-purchase agreement for nine new fire engines, three ladder trucks and one rescue truck. The number of district full time employees increases to 336, to provide support in long neglected areas like training, telecommunications, information technology and facilities management. The budget includes the one-third installment of a 7.7 percent wage increase for firefighters and also the elimination of a portion of their 9 percent subvention of district pension costs. ConFire will operate 24 fire stations, including 24 companies and three squads, up from 23 stations and zero squads proposed in 2014-15.

The district will also meet its reserve requirement of 10 percent of general fund expenditures, and though it will require more than \$4 million of the fund balance to achieve that goal, it is far less than the \$9.5 million needed the previous year.

District revenue is budgeted to increase for the third straight year. Property tax revenue jumps from a projected \$95 million to more than \$101 million. ConFire will receive the second half of a two-year federal staffing grant of \$9.6 million. And the district expects to recognize \$1.7 million in first responder fees, charges billed to insurance companies for emergency medical treatment provided at the scene by firefighters.

Not included in the budget presentation were potential cost savings of the proposed station 46 joint venture with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, nor the potential revenue increases should ConFire assume control of the available Contra Costa County ambulance contract in 2016.

"In view of increasing revenues and a sustained economic recovery, this budget attempts to address some of (our) needs while still maintaining practical fiscal controls," Carman wrote in a letter to the advisory board. The county, in its budget document, acknowledged that ConFire has had to balance its fiscal difficulties "with maintaining a system that ensures the health and welfare of residents within the district."

The Board of Supervisors will approve ConFire's budget, along with the budgets of all of the county departments and certain special districts, at its May 12 meeting.

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