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## Neighbors Reach Out to ConFire

*By Nick Marnell*

Less than two years after county administrator David Twa warned that the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District was in danger of bankruptcy, and not two years since consultant Fitch and Associates advised the ConFire board of directors that the district business model was unsustainable, ConFire has become a highly sought-after business partner.

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District and ConFire continue to fine-tune the details of a joint venture to build fire station 46, which will serve north Orinda and west Lafayette. American Medical Response, an ambulance transport provider, agreed to subcontract with ConFire as they jointly pitch for the 5-year Contra Costa County ambulance contract. And two neighboring fire districts have approached ConFire about consolidation or contracting for service.

A defeated parcel tax in 2012 followed by the failure of a proposed district benefit assessment in April forced the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District to close two fire stations, and the district reached out to ConFire for help. ConFire Chief Jeff Carman met with East County Chief Hugh Henderson and his board about consolidation.

"My answer is no," Carman told his Advisory Fire Commission June 8. "I am not interested in consolidation. Other districts can run cheaper than we can, and there is no efficiency in size." The chief said he may consider having ECCFPD contract with ConFire, and he did confirm that ConFire executed a new automatic aid agreement with East County.

Fire Chief Charles Hanley of the Rodeo-Hercules Fire District said that he approached ConFire about contracting for service, as his district recently cut staff and closed a fire station in part due to a lower refinery property tax assessment and higher employee retirement costs. "We're not big enough to fight off all of those entities," said Hanley. Carman said he is still thinking about the best way to help RHFD.

"We need to balance the level of service for our own citizens," Carman told the commission, which agreed that the district's main focus must be to serve the ConFire taxpayers. Yet the depletion of resources of the adjacent fire districts affects ConFire not only financially.

"It's tough on our guys, who see the East County firefighters doing whatever it takes regardless of the jeopardy they put themselves in," said the chief. "Our guys don't like to sit around and watch that. They want to add themselves to the assignment even though we don't have the resources to do it."

Also torn is Vince Wells, president of Local 1230 of the firefighters' union and a ConFire captain.

"I'm not against consolidations, but I don't want to see us go back into the red," he said. "The revenue is never enough because the people will demand more stations and more service."

Which can be the result when districts that pay 6 cents on the tax dollar for fire protection count on the help of county districts that pay up to 21 cents for the service. "Our subsidizing other districts is detrimental because there are people who believe they don't have to pay extra taxes and can just rely on ConFire," said Carman.

The pressure on all fire agencies is expected to increase as northern California enters into a potentially devastating fire season after four years of drought conditions.

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