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Published August 26th, 2015

ConFire Station 16 Back in Play

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District board of directors authorized fire chief Jeff Carman Aug. 18 to investigate the cost of reopening fire station 16 in Lafayette, putting on hold plans for a joint fire station 46 with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

Discussions of the joint venture have been fraught with negatives since then-MOFD chief Randy Bradley proposed in 2013 that Orinda station 43 and Lafayette station 16 merge across districts. MOFD questioned the financial capability of ConFire to complete the deal, and the ConFire board originally voted against the consolidation, blaming a terrible financial environment. In 2014, as the economy improved, both districts began work on the joint station agreement.

But Carman told the board that the station 46 negotiations have been difficult. "There are operational contract issues," he said, starting with the annual district call volume: 5,000 for MOFD and 50,000 for ConFire. "They have more time to do things like public education, things we'd love to have the time to do," he said, noting that if MOFD took its company out of station 46 to conduct an educational seminar at a high school, ConFire may find issue with that. And if ConFire wanted to pull the 46 company to move up and cover for a Walnut Creek call, Carman said MOFD residents might have a problem. "And that's going to occur a disproportionate amount of time," he said. The chief said that response times in western Lafayette have increased more than 30 seconds since station 16 closed. "Lafayette is in a high fire hazard severity zone," he explained. "There is potential for devastating property loss, and that worries me more than anything."

North Orinda residents have touted response time concerns of their own should their local station 43 be closed, staging a petition drive to halt construction of the proposed joint station. Carman acknowledged that the opposition could further delay the project. "It was clear to me that the Orinda residents were not happy about moving their fire station and being associated with ConFire," he said. "It gave me insight that this was not going to be an easy process."

The clincher for the chief was a recent report from a ConFire contractor who disputed conventional wisdom and said that shuttered station 16 could be rebuilt, and at a much lower cost than the construction of fire station 46. ConFire's capital investment was estimated to be less than \$1 million to repair station 16 as opposed to \$6 million to build station 46, and the operational costs for station 16 would increase \$800,000 per year, about half of the district's share of projected annual costs of the joint station. Carman projected a 12-15 month timetable for the repairs, and he asked the board for authorization to further investigate station 16 as an alternative to station 46.

"Move forward with all haste," said director Karen Mitchoff, with the other three directors expressing a similar sentiment.

"We're disappointed because we were making real progress on a deal," said MOFD board president Alex Evans. "But we are happy that ConFire is going to rebuild and restaff station 16. Our fear was that they'd never do that and MOFD would carry an unfair burden." MOFD Fire Chief Stephen Healy agreed that opening station 16 would increase regional fire capacity. "However, 46 did offer the flexibility of having one or two engines staffed on a daily basis," he said. Evans said the board will take no action on the property purchased for the new station until station 16 is up and running.

"I am doing back flips!" said Ellen Dale, leader of the north Orinda community group that opposed station 46. "We were prepared to force this plan to a referendum. So, the chief was correct in his assessment that this would have been delayed."

Carman plans to update his board Sept. 22 on the feasibility of reopening station 16.

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