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## Supervisor Says No to Struggling Fire District

*By Nick Marnell*

Supervisor Candace Andersen again refused to allocate money from the county general fund to support a special district when she voted against a \$311,000 bailout of the troubled East Contra Costa Fire Protection District Nov. 17. "When I first came on the board three years ago, we refused to give our own Contra Costa fire district the money they needed so that we would not have to close fire stations," said Andersen, whose district includes Lamorinda. "I cannot justify this one-time expense."

One of those county fire stations she referred to, Contra Costa County Fire Protection District station 16 in Lafayette, remains closed.

"I don't know that I would have supported drawing from the general fund if Lafayette had offered up additional money to keep Station 16 open or reopened," Andersen said later. The county, the fire district and the cities of Brentwood and Oakley will contribute more than \$2 million to the cost of reopening the ECCFPD Knightsen station for 18 months, a stopgap measure until the district finds a way to increase funding for its fire service.

"From my perspective, Lafayette taxpayers were already significantly contributing toward their fire service and weren't getting sufficient value for their tax dollars," continued Andersen. "Also, at the time, I had serious concerns about how we were delivering fire service, and wasn't inclined to go to taxpayers or cities and ask for more funding until we had done all that we could to become more efficient and have a plan toward sustainability in place."

Speakers pounded the sustainability of ECCFPD as a recurrent theme. The district dropped from eight fire stations in 2008 to three today, and voters twice rejected calls for additional funding to enhance fire service. "It is not sustainable for East County to draw on our resources at the rate they are using them today," said ConFire chief Jeff Carman. "We're a system. It puts pressure on everybody, including Lafayette."

The supervisors approved the bailout 4-1, but with a list of contingencies, including that ECCFPD pursue status as a independent district, elect its own governing body and change its name. "These things should have been done eight years ago," said Supervisor Mary Piepho.

"The biggest stumbling block for me is the precedent," said Andersen, who earlier this year rejected using general fund money to keep Doctors Medical Center, a special district, open. "We have competing needs in the county. At least one other fire district is in serious financial trouble, and I'm sure there are other districts which could use money too."

"It's a further explanation of why (the supervisors) think they have to do something in Lafayette to open station 16," said Moraga-Orinda Fire District director Fred Weil at the Nov. 18 district meeting. "If they were handing money out to East County and not reopening 16, they would have smelled the tar and seen the feathers out of Lafayette. And for good reason."

The Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force declined to comment on the county's action. "In addition to investigating detachment, we have been focused on the joint station 46, and more recently on reopening station 16. I suspect that that will be our focus until it is accomplished," said co-chair Brandt Andersson.

Carman said he plans to present a proposal for the reopening of Lafayette station 16 to his board in December.

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