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ConFire May Start From Scratch on Station 16

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District will consider a tear down and rebuild of fire station 16 in Lafayette, according to upcoming fiscal year budget documents the district submitted to its board.

ConFire planned to rehab the structure but after receiving numerous construction proposals decided that it may be best to bulldoze the station and start from scratch. "If I had my way, that's the way we'd go," Fire Chief Jeff Carman told his advisory fire commission in April.

The reversal of the Lafayette fire station rebuilding plan is analogous to the turnaround of ConFire, which barely resembles the struggling district that Carman took over two-and-a-half years ago. ConFire was on the brink of a financial inferno in 2013. It had closed seven engine companies, stopped filling firefighter vacancies, was running up to a \$10 million structural deficit and was perilously close to exhausting its fund balances. The county administrator warned that the district was headed toward bankruptcy.

The budget presented for the 2016-17 fiscal year recommends funding for 25 fire stations, 26 companies, one squad and 353 full-time employees, including a new assistant chief of emergency medical services. By the end of the fiscal year the district will have placed 13 new fire engines, four trucks and three other vehicles into service. ConFire can restore these resources thanks to projected revenue of more than \$123 million, nearly \$30 million more than three years ago, due in large part to increased property taxes and first responder fees.

A major step in the district turnaround took place Jan. 1, when ConFire became the county's exclusive operator of emergency ambulance service - not including the areas covered by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District.

"That was the highlight of the year," said Carman. Though the new program was expected to run cash-negative for several months, the first quarter appeared to finish strong. "It's better than we expected in terms of revenue," said the chief. The upcoming fiscal year will include the first complete 12-month cycle of ambulance operations.

The district will also ramp up its involvement with two county departments next year. ConFire plans to provide additional staffing for the county sheriff's helicopter program, and to work more closely with the county Hazardous Materials Division. Carman ran the Hazmat Division when he worked for the Roseville Fire Department.

The chief said he hopes to present a proposal for fire station 16 construction to his board May 10.

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