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ConFire Chief: Reach Out, He'll Be There

By Nick Marnell



Jeff Carman Photo provided

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District was in dire need of strong leadership. The district had closed four fire stations after a failed 2012 parcel tax initiative, the labor group had tuned out management, property tax revenue was flat and according to the county administrator, the district was headed toward bankruptcy. Lafayette, a city that accounted for more than \$8 million a year in tax revenue, threatened to detach from the district after the closure of one of its fire stations and plans for a replacement station stalled. If that weren't doom and gloom enough, a consultant warned the county that the ConFire business model was unsustainable.

It was the exact opportunity that Jeff Carman, a 29-year veteran of the Roseville Fire Department, had been seeking.

"I was ready for the challenge," said Carman, who took over as chief of the \$100 million district in October 2013. "They wanted someone who would look at things differently. ConFire is much bigger than Roseville, so it was a little intimidating. I knew it wasn't a boutique fire department," - over 240 ConFire suppression personnel respond to 45,000 calls a year out of 25 staffed fire stations - "but I was up for it."

Carman, 52, in good enough shape that he recently took up snowboarding, started as a junior firefighter for the city of Grass Valley. As soon as he turned 18 he went to work for an ambulance

company. He rose to assistant chief of operations at Roseville, leading the largest all-hazard fire district in the second-most industrialized county in California. There he faced his most difficult decision as an incident commander.

A fire in a tank car holding 270,000 gallons of propane forced the evacuation of nearly 5,000 homes in the city of Lincoln. "A two-mile blast if it exploded, seven to eight thousand fatalities," Carman said. "It would have killed more people than any incident I've been in." How to keep the rail car cool enough so it wouldn't blow up, with temperatures rising to 1,000 degrees, was the challenge. "If it hit 1,200 we knew it would explode. It was the toughest decision I ever made: should we just let this thing blow, or deal with it? The group agreed - we had no choice. We had to go in. We sent firefighters into the blast zone for 36 hours, pumping 5,500 gallons of water a minute, until the car ran out of fuel."

That was the decisive leadership ConFire desperately sought, and Carman quickly got his chance to exhibit that leadership.

Jumping Right In

A consultant told the fire board that the struggling district should take two engines out of service in select companies and replace them with three, two-person squads, since more than two-thirds of the district calls were medical related. "But what about the third that are fire responses?" said Carman, who fought the proposal and secured agreement from his directors. "The board gave

me the latitude to do what I saw was right, and it has paid off."

"He was open and transparent with us serving on the fire board, and also with our employees and labor groups," ConFire board chair Candace Andersen said.

The chief took off from there.

The district hadn't hired firefighters in five years. Mandatory overtime racked the staff, which was down 40 positions. "We had an internal clash with human resources. They weren't working fast enough. We started meeting and broke down the barriers," Carman said. The district filled three fire academies in 18 months and today is nearly fully staffed.

"We didn't get along with the sheriff's department," the chief said. Again he reached out. "My first day on the job I had a meeting at the sheriff's office," said assistant chief of operations Lon Goetsch. "We talked about partnering to use their helicopter for fire rescue in addition to law enforcement." The departments struck a deal, and ConFire now has a dedicated budget for an aerial rescue program. The helicopter crew recently helped ConFire rescue a collapsed hiker in the Lafayette hills.

Building Morale

After the parcel tax defeat, the rank and file felt betrayed by the public, and they did not trust the fire and county leadership. "Carman built morale. He visited every station, consistently, a couple a week. He asked for feedback," said Vince Wells, president of International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1230. "In our contract negotiations, during conflict with the negotiating team, instead of the usual standard of the chief staying out of it, he spoke up and advocated for us to get a deal done."

The city of Lafayette, bitter over the closure of fire station 16 at the western end of the city, threatened to detach from the district. Carman held things together by meeting with city officials and task force members and updating them on ConFire's progress. "I had to show the public that we're worth what they're paying for. The firefighters do some incredible work, and they just go back to their stations and don't talk about it. On the one hand, I admire that. But, you've got to let people know what you're doing." In May, the ConFire board approved a total rebuild of station 16.

Carman's legacy with ConFire will likely be tied to his integration of nearly the entire county emergency ambulance transport system into the fire district. A non-traditional revenue source, yes, for a district that sorely needs revenue; but by absorbing the ambulance system into ConFire, where he can control dispatch, Carman saved the duplication of an engine and a private ambulance response, easing wear and tear on the engines and keeping them available for fire emergencies. It was a first-of-its-kind amalgamation in recent California history.

"Carman always gave me a heads-up before a controversial subject, like, starting the ambulance business," Wells said. "He wanted our buy-in before he even approached the board." Added Goetsch, "He used his industry contacts and pulled all of that expertise together. He reached out to fire chiefs throughout the county, then to his boss and then the board."

The chief said his ambulance deal is his favorite. "We were able to take the money that was going to the private company and use it to enhance our local medical system."

Working with MOFD

Even a deal that fell through did not stain Carman's image: the fire station 46 joint venture between ConFire and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. Carman inherited the project, an attempt to save each fire district \$1 million annually in operating costs by consolidating two stations at the Orinda-Lafayette border.

"The 46 project was a little frustrating," Carman said. "It looks so good to the public, like it's so easy to do, but it involved two drastically different agencies and putting them under the same roof. I never think anything is impossible, but that was going to be problematic."

MOFD chief Stephen Healy praised Carman's efforts through the tedious, time-consuming negotiation process. "He was always very respectful toward our organization, which I really appreciated," Healy said. "We're still friends and have since worked together on a number of other projects."

A County Leader

Bankruptcy is no longer mentioned. Neighboring agencies have reached out to ConFire, for help with everything from additional mutual aid to station construction. Impenetrable walls barely exist between ConFire and other county departments. Tax revenue increased, and after years of zero spending on capital projects, the district unveiled a 5-year, \$36 million capital improvement

plan. "I've never worked harder than I am now," Goetsch said. "We've revitalized our organization."

"I am enjoying my job every day," Carman said. "It has its challenges but we seem to be solving them and that is satisfying. I appreciate the support we get from the community."

Lafayette fire commissioner Bill Granados summarized maybe best of all the respect the chief has garnered.

"Every decision the guy has made has been the right one," he said.



The Chief off duty in Cabo Photo provided

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