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## ConFire continues to struggle with firefighter staffing

By Nick Marnell

When Fire Chief Jeff Carman presented the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District 2017-18 budget recommendations to his advisory fire commission and his board of directors, he highlighted positive district events like the planned rebuild of Fire Station 16 in Lafayette, but the chief also warned about a nagging firefighter staffing issue.

Bolstered by a forecast increase in property tax revenue, new funding sources like the emergency medical service first responder fees and the sustainability of the emergency ambulance transport program, the district budgeted a 6 percent revenue increase to \$126.6 million for 2107-18. The \$94 million expense for compensation, which includes nearly \$50 million in salaries and overtime and \$26 million in retirement contributions, will cover the operation of 25 fire stations and wages for more than 350 fulltime employees. ConFire also carries a \$154 million unfunded pension liability and a \$14 million debt for its pension obligation bonds.

But the chief said his main concern was the pressure on the organization caused by the difficulty of sustaining a fully staffed operation.

"I worry every day that something significant will happen to our firefighters," Carman told his advisory fire commission April 10. He talked about the ladder truck destroyed on Highway 4 by a speeding driver who died on the scene and of the firefighter who fell from a roof during a fire attack, saved by a balcony that helped break his fall. The chief noted that ConFire responded to 65,000 calls in 2016, ranking the district in the top five nationally for call volume.

Maintaining a stable work force has been a struggle for the district, as ConFire is down 14 vacancies after having just completed a fire academy. Because of retirements, vacations and leaves, the chief said the resultant overtime puts pressure on the firefighters and can force injuries and bad decisions.

"We may have to accept that we will always need two academies a year," Carman said, as he plans to fill Academy 51 in the fall with 30 recruits.

Also adding to the overtime demands of the firefighters will be the predicted blockbuster fire season, with Lafayette possibly at the center of the action. Because of its proximity to a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, the Lafayette area continues to worry Carman, especially after the heavy rains this winter.

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[back](#)

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