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Lafayette officials react to the approval of Fire Station 16

By Nick Marnell

When the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District board of directors unanimously authorized the execution of a \$3.4 million contract for the rebuild of Lafayette Fire Station 16, there may not have been a more relieved human being in the county than Fire Chief Jeff Carman.

"The hurdles we had to jump through to get to where we are today were ridiculous in my opinion, but Chief (Lewis) Broschard had the perseverance and tenacity to stick with it and bring this to fruition," Carman said. Not the least of the hurdles was convincing the city of Lafayette that the fire district was deserving of its business in the first place, after the county closed Fire Station 16 in 2012. Many a meeting of the city's emergency services task force - which did a top-to-bottom assessment of the delivery of fire and emergency medical service in the city - devolved into accusations that Carman was stonewalling the station rebuild in order to save the county the money.

Then surfaced the option of Fire Station 46, a joint venture between ConFire and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District to combine stations 16 and 43 into one fire station at the Orinda-Lafayette border. But the project never got off the ground, mostly due to philosophical differences between the two agencies. "It took a lot of thought to make the decision to back away from that concept, and the decision to do this on our own was not an easy one," Carman said.

"I always felt that a new Station 16 would be the only way to go," said former Lafayette fire commissioner Bill Granados.

Slowly, the tables began to turn in ConFire's favor. "I was mayor when Chief Carman sat down with me and the city manager, and told us that the joint station on the Orinda border was not going to work, but the fire district had the commitment and the money to reopen Station 16. He was as good as his word," said former Lafayette emergency services task force co-chair Brandt Andersson. "It took longer than we'd hoped, as it nearly always does, but I always felt confident that Station 16 would be rebuilt."

The firefighters union did not support the combined station and heralded the March 13 action by the board. "It is great to see that the plans to rebuild and staff Station 16 have finally cleared all hurdles and are moving forward," said Local 1230 President Vince Wells. "This will be a significant improvement of service in the area."

Former emergency task force co-chair Traci Reilly concurred. "When it's all said and done, most people will not remember how many hours were spent discussing and debating the merits of rebuilding Station 16, because in the near future we will once again have an operational fire station in the west end of Lafayette," Reilly said.

"It has been a long road with many a winding turn," said Peter Clark, who relentlessly pushed the fire district to action. "I and the other task force members have been frustrated by the leisurely pace of progress toward better response times in western Lafayette - arguably the highest fire danger zone in the county. So (the March 13) vote is cause for serious celebration."

Lafayette Mayor Don Tatzin and Vice Mayor Cam Burks both termed the board's approval a milestone, with Tatzin expressing cautious optimism. "Let's hope that construction proceeds quickly and without any alarms," he said.

ConFire director Candace Andersen, who had smiled from ear-to-ear as she made the motion for the approval of the fire station contract, sounded as excited as the No. 16 seed UMBC Retrievers who upset No. 1 Virginia in the NCAA Tournament. "Stating that I am delighted to see us reach this point would be an understatement," Andersen said. "We did it!"

Carman finally had a chance to exhale. "The relationship between the fire district and the city of Lafayette (and the emergency services task force) was pretty contentious when I first got here, but they too eventually gave us a chance and the relationship that has formed between us now is strong and trusting, which is important to me. Right to this point some people still questioned whether we would follow through, and I hope our actions have proven we are truly a partner in the public's safety."

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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