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ConFire financial picture stable for 2019-20

By Nick Marnell

Fire Chief Lewis Broschard ushered in the new regime at the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District by putting his stamp on the 2019-20 fiscal year recommended budget, which he presented to his board of directors at the April 9 district meeting.

ConFire projects \$147.9 million in revenue for the upcoming fiscal year, of which \$130 million will be derived from property tax, forecast to jump 5 percent over 2018-19. Expenses eat up nearly all of the budgeted revenue, with a \$16.3 million payment for the district pension obligation bonds one of the largest district costs. That expense will disappear in 2022, when the bonds are paid off in full.

The district will end 2018-19 with a general fund balance of more than \$35 million, well above the policy of 10 percent of district expenditures. ConFire plans to create a capital expenditure fund with a \$10 million transfer out of the general fund balance in 2019-20 to help pay for deferred maintenance and future fire station construction.

The financial picture for the Alliance, the ConFire ambulance transport program operated with subcontractor American Medical Response, continues to improve, with \$47.1 million of expenses against \$52.2 million in revenue for 2019-20. The surplus will add to the \$17 million Alliance fund balance projected for this year.

"At the current rate of payer mix, collection rate and contract expenses, the system is financially sustainable," Broschard said, addressing the biggest concern of many - including the district board - when the county awarded the ambulance contract to the fire district in 2015.

Though the finances appear to be solid, Broschard told the board that both the fire district and the Alliance face a major challenge. "It's becoming a statewide staffing issue to find qualified paramedics in the private sector as well as the public space that we recruit for," Broschard said. The chief partly blamed the booming economy for the labor shortage, and also the certification expense a recruit must incur to become a paramedic.

One of the areas where the fire district concedes it can improve is in providing accessible financial information to the public. Financial performance is discussed at public meetings during annual budget preparations and when being reviewed by fire commissioners, but the only finance links on the ConFire website take the public to the Contra Costa County budget documents, which most private citizens have no chance of deciphering, let alone finding ConFire information in the first place.

Easier access to district information is a goal for fire district public information officer Steve Hill, who noted that ConFire recently made - and will continue to make - numerous changes to its website designed to make it more useful and informative for the public, as well as more interesting and interactive. Hill explained that the homepage now includes real-time information about the district, the ConFire Twitter feed with incident-response information, and a button leading to the district updated significant incident reporting system.

"In the coming weeks and months, we plan to add pages addressing the district's financials, fire service career and recruiting information, and more detailed operational response statistics," Hill said.

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