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Grand jury comes down on ConFire over fire inspections and record keeping

By Nick Marnell

A Contra Costa County grand jury issued a report in May recommending that the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District upgrade and periodically audit its record management system to maintain compliance with state-mandated fire inspection regulations and to ensure accurate and timely fire inspection reporting. The report also recommended that ConFire hire additional inspectors and make the status of fire inspections available to the public through an online address-based program.

The Oakland Ghost Ship fire killed 36 in 2017, and lax fire inspections on the property were alleged in victim lawsuits. Ensuing media coverage in 2018 found that many fire agencies, including ConFire, had failed to keep up with annual state-mandated fire inspections for schools and multifamily residences. ConFire acknowledged that it fell behind on its inspections, blaming budget cutbacks because of the Great Recession and the inability to hire qualified personnel.

With improved finances and a sharper focus on the lagged inspections, ConFire hired new fire inspectors in mid-2018 and reassigned inspectors from the engineering department to help out with the backlog. ConFire then added temporary clerks to input data for the field inspectors, which allowed the inspectors to spend more time in the field. As the district caught up on its inspections, it allowed this newspaper access to its Lafayette inspection reports and to accompany it on Lafayette state-mandated fire inspections, which ConFire completed, as well as all mandatory annual inspections in its database, by the end of the year. To help ensure that fire inspections are conducted on time in the future, the grand jury recommended that the district increase its number of fire inspectors. Seven current inspectors conduct 8,000 state-mandated inspections each year, exceeding the 900 annual inspections each code officer can average, the report said. The grand jury urged ConFire to replace its time-consuming data recording system with a mobile digital system, allowing code officers to enter inspection data directly into an electronic device on site rather than having to input the data later at the district office. The report also recommended that the district periodically conduct audits of its record management system, publish a quarterly report on the status of fire inspections and make the information readily available to the public through a web-based program.

Neither Fire Chief Lewis Broschard nor his board of directors commented on the grand jury report at the June 11 district meeting. "By law, we have 90 days to prepare and submit a response, which we will do," ConFire spokesman Steve Hill said. "I expect this response may be addressed at either the July or August fire board meeting and will likely be posted on the grand jury website, along with other such responses, some time thereafter."

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