



Published July 10th, 2019

## Lafayette Fire Station 16: The long and winding road

By Nick Marnell

Eight words from the deputy fire chief summed up the exhilaration and the exasperation of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District regarding the long-delayed opening of Fire Station 16 in Lafayette.

"We have power! We are up and running," Aaron McAlister said on July 2. The final piece of the power puzzle was the installation of a new transformer by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, which delivered the equipment by the day it promised.

The excitement of that accomplishment, though, barely masked the frustration over PG&E delays the district experienced throughout the winter and spring.

PG&E approved the fire station power plan in March 2018, but in February the utility rejected the indoor placement of the power meter. "During a visual inspection, the inside meter conflicted with our safety standards," PG&E spokesman Matt Nauman said. "We told the fire district design team that we required 24-hour access to the meter."

Concurrently, confusion reigned over the type of utility panel required for the station, whether 200 amp or 400 amp. An April design approved by the company proved "unbuildable," according to the district, and approval of the updated design for the indoor meter and 400 amp power supply took more than a month. Not only did ConFire management become frustrated by the delays, so did the district governing board. "Given the role PG&E has played in wildfires in Northern California, you would think that they would do all that they could to get local fire stations open," Director and County Supervisor Candace Andersen said. "It was incredibly frustrating to have these delays and it should not have required a county supervisor and PG&E's legal counsel to get involved to also resolve where an electric meter should be placed."

The city of Lafayette lost patience in June, as the utility had not yet supplied a date for the transformer installation.

"To think that PG&E (yes, PG&E) is responsible for the delay of a publicly funded fire station and capability from becoming operational in the heart of the California fire season - in the middle of a high fire risk area - is just stunning given what's happened over the past few years," said Lafayette City Council Member Cam Burks who, fueled by public outrage, threatened to convene the city's Emergency Services Task Force to investigate the delayed station opening, which had been expected in March.

The political pressure appeared to work, as in mid-June PG&E promised the transformer by July 2, and delivered.

Nauman again stressed that the safety of the utility's customers and the communities it serves was PG&E's most important responsibility, and said the company worked closely with ConFire to ensure the station met company safety standards. "We work with first responders every day and will continue to collaborate to keep the Lafayette community safe," Nauman said.

McAlister acknowledged that PG&E was not solely responsible for the station delays, as heavy rains this spring caused the soil to compact and pushed back the paving of the driveway. The deputy chief said that the building should be operational on Aug. 1, with the crews, which have worked out of Fire Station 15 since April, able to move in by the middle of the month.

And then, after six years with no fire station along the winding roads of Happy Valley, Lafayette will lay claim to the newest fire station in Contra Costa County.

Reach the reporter at: [nick@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:nick@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA