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ConFire responds to grand jury report on fire inspections

By Nick Marnell

A Contra Costa County civil grand jury found that the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District had fallen behind in its mandatory fire inspections of schools and multifamily residences in 2018 and presented the district eight findings and six recommendations, mostly regarding the number of personnel needed to conduct more than 7,600 mandated annual inspections, incomplete record keeping and an obsolete records management system. ConFire acknowledged the report with a formal response in early August, though the district did not agree with all of the 14 points posited by the grand jury.

ConFire has implemented or agreed to implement grand jury recommendations to evaluate the size of the fire prevention bureau, produce a quarterly report on the status of compliance with state mandated inspections and to replace its records management system to allow code officials to enter inspection data directly into a tablet device in the field, rather than manually when the inspectors arrive back at the office. The district said that the data harvested into the new software system, though not directly connected to the computer aided dispatch system, will be available to the fire dispatchers as needed.

The district noted that one recommendation - that ConFire set up by the end of June a publicly available internet-based lookup feature disclosing the status of fire inspections - will not be implemented "because it is not warranted or feasible."

"We are in the process of selecting and implementing a new records management system for the Fire Prevention Bureau, which we expect to offer many benefits for our inspectors, customers and the community," district spokesman Steve Hill said. "However, we are looking at posting a regular inspections summary to our website and are investigating what level of additional detail our current system will allow us to include. This interim solution is in process."

That the public was not informed of the fiscal impacts of the Great Recession on state mandated fire inspections prior to 2018 was disputed by the district. While there was no formal reporting of fire inspection activity to the ConFire board of directors until this year, the district said it provided fire prevention bureau activity to its Advisory Fire Commission bimonthly, and to its board of directors via the monthly fire chief's report, from 2010 through 2013.

ConFire also disagreed with the grand jury finding that the district had no audit process in hand to confirm the accuracy and completeness of its RMS data. The district responded that it did initiate an audit process to confirm the accuracy of its data related to occupancies in 2018, and promised to implement an improved audit process with the deployment of the new records management system by the middle of next year.

"We have been working prior to the grand jury investigation to make improvements to our fire inspection system, and the work is ongoing," Fire Chief Lewis Broschard said.

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