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## County approves 15% wage increase for ConFire employees

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District board of directors unanimously approved a three-year labor agreement with Local 1230 firefighters that gives the rank and file a 15% pay increase over the term of the contract. The board also agreed at its May 26 meeting to the same percentage pay increase for district chief officers and for unrepresented safety management employees. The new agreements take effect July 1.

"Thank you for making our contract a priority, for being timely and for supporting us," Vito Impastato, president of the United Chief Officers Association, told the board.

County Administrator David Twa said that the first year cost of the new labor packages adds \$4.4 million in expense to the district, and that the \$26.3 million added labor expense over three years is the fully loaded cost for all positions, including taxes, benefits, overtime and the employer contribution to the employee pension plan.

"At the time (the contract) was agreed to, our projections showed it could easily be absorbed into our ConFire budget - both the base wage and all additional pension cost," said Candace Andersen, chair of both the county Board of Supervisors and the fire district board of directors. "After discussing it with our county administration we felt we had adequate income and reserves to move forward with the raise we had agreed to." ConFire projects its general fund reserve balance at \$32.8 million for this fiscal year.

In its recommended 2021 budget, Contra Costa County calls for property tax growth of 4.5% for next year and beyond; however, because of the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic county officials now say that figure may be optimistic. The city of Lafayette, with some of the most stable real estate values in the fire district, projects only a 3% property tax increase for 2021. ConFire derives 88% of its revenue from property taxes.

Andersen said that the negotiations and the offer to settle with the firefighters were at the same level the county had settled with other public safety groups and were part of a long-range plan to achieve full staffing and reduce mandatory overtime, too much of which puts a stress on employee morale. Fire district officials have said recruitment for firefighters and paramedics has been a challenge, and county negotiators analyzed pay scales of regional fire agencies to come up with a number that would bring ConFire employees' earnings into line.

"This contract keeps the firefighters' pay consistent with the median range and will provide for stable recruitment as well as a stable workforce, as we likely head into very difficult times," Twa said.

All employee pay increases are spread equally over the three years, with a 5% raise taking effect each July 1. Firefighters will continue to contribute anywhere from 9% to 18% of their pay to fund their retirement account with the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association.

"I appreciate all the parties coming together and committing the time and resources to reach an agreement during these challenging times," ConFire Chief Lewis Broschard said. "Having these agreements in place for our firefighters, dispatchers, fire prevention personnel and chief officers allows us to focus on our mission which is particularly important as we continue to deal with the ongoing challenges of COVID and what is likely to be a busy fire season ahead of us."

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District labor agreement with its firefighters runs through June 30, 2021.

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