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Published July 18th, 2012

## Dire Predictions from Fire Chief if Parcel Tax Fails

By Cathy Tyson

Closure of seven to 10 of the District's 28 fire stations, longer response times and higher costs for home and business fire insurance - that's what Contra Costa Fire District Chief Daryl Louder spelled out if a \$75 parcel tax doesn't pass in November during a recent presentation to the Lafayette City Council. If passed, the parcel tax would exempt senior citizens and sunset in 7 years - raising just enough, approximately \$17 million, to keep existing stations open and current levels of staffing.

With 90 percent of the District's funding coming directly from property taxes, it has taken a hit from declining home values - between 2008 and 2011 property taxes sunk 13 percent, equivalent to \$32 million. The 2012-2013 fiscal year budget includes tapping into \$14 million of reserves to bridge the funding gap and keep as many stations open as possible.

Projected fiscal year budgets without the parcel tax are bleak; fiscal year 2013-2014 has a \$13 million deficit that balloons to a deficit of over \$20 million in fiscal year 2015-2016.

Louder explained in detail how the District got to this point and the consequences of passing or not passing the proposed parcel tax that will affect the roughly 600,000 residents in the District's coverage area that ranges from Lafayette to Antioch to Clayton. The District has already made 10 percent salary cuts, eliminated positions, and deferred capital expenses and maintenance. When key ingredients were combined - waning property taxes, increased pension and health insurance costs, that fueled the fire that has now reached a turning point; either pass the parcel tax or face draconian cuts.

"We recognize we have less revenue to work with," said Louder. One unit in Walnut Creek was "de-staffed" recently leaving only one of the two crews at that station, with a similar situation at a fire station in Concord.

Despite the bleak financial picture, Louder pointed out the critical importance of response time, in the case of medical emergency or fire, underscoring the need for adequate staffing. He pointed out that structure fires double in size every two minutes and reach flashover in less than eight minutes.

Council members questioned the rationale behind the tax. Council Member Brandt Andersson pointed out that the District can't put off long-term needs forever and this relatively modest tax will still leave a significant structural deficit. Actual fires only account for three to four percent of the calls received-Andersen asked, at what point do you start to change the model?

Louder reiterated that the District is designed to respond to fires; residents are getting added value when personnel respond to medical calls, and response time matters.

If this situation sounds familiar, voters need look no further than the East Contra Costa Fire District. A \$197 parcel tax, Measure S, went up in flames in June 2012 - falling short of passing by 23 percent. Later that month 3 of its six stations closed, now only nine firefighters are on duty to serve the residents of Brentwood, Oakley, Byron, Bethel Island and beyond.

Louder did not specify what the future holds for Station 16 on Los Arabis, although they are exploring options including repair or replacement, perhaps with a modular unit, and paying attention to the costs involved with each option. At the moment, he said, they are still waiting on results of environmental tests for mold and rodents before they decide how to go forward.

The current funding situation started before Louder joined the District in June of 2010, taking over for interim Fire Chief John Ross. In October of that year he talked about service delivery modifications. At this point it will be up to voters to decide in November what "service delivery modification" really means.

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