

Guest Commentary:

Fire District sends \$1.9 million of operating funds to Oakley

By Bryan Scott

In a display of crass Board manipulation, the Fire Chief of East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD) convinced the appointed Board of Directors to authorize giving \$1.9 million of operating funds to the City of Oakley just before announcing that the district had lost a critical public safety services partner.

The financial transaction approval came just prior to the Fire Chief's announcement that after November 1 of this year ECCFPD would be without the Fire Prevention Bureau services it has relied on since the district was formed in 2002.

On August 1 Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ConFire) notified ECCFPD that they would be terminating their fire safety inspection services agreement in 90 days.

Agenda Item 8, "Station 55 Advisory Committee Report" dealing with the financial transaction came just before Agenda Item 9a, "Report of the Fire Chief / Informational Staff Reports, Fire Prevention Bureau Update."

This is significant because ECCFPD has no budget to replace these services.

In dealing with the financial transaction Directors Joe Young and Erick Stonebarger questioned the legal consequences of taking property tax funds from an operating account, dedicated to providing services to the community, and shifting the funds to a capital account, before transferring the funds on to the City of Oakley.

The funds transfer follows a legal settlement between Oakley and Shea Homes Inc. Shea had agreed to support the construction of a fire station as a condition of getting approval to build homes in the city, but had delayed providing construction funds to Oakley.

Change orders made by the fire district after the settlement agreement was reached contributed to increasing the cost of the fire station.

ECCFPD currently has insufficient operating funds to staff an additional fire station. The district currently has three fire stations serving 249 square miles and 120,000 people. A fourth station was closed in June, 2017.

The transaction is being called a loan, with annual payments of \$200,000 coming from impact fees the City of Oakley collects. These impact fees must be used for providing fire protection

regardless of whether the new fire station is built, and so constitute no new funds for the fire district. The fire district would be receiving the funds anyway as Oakley relies on ECCFPD for fire protection services.

Directors complained several times to Chief Helmick about the lack of advance notice and lack of information on the complex financial transaction. The Directors were being asked to approve an agreement that did not exist, with conditions that may or may not be included in any agreement.

Chief Helmick promoted the financial transaction as a way to get a fire station built now, as opposed to later. The ECCFPD change orders for the facility included a multi-purpose room that would be used as a training room and for unspecified community events, and for a storage shed.

The ECCFPD website states:

“East Contra Costa Fire Prevention Bureau has the authority to enter, investigate and perform routine fire inspections of all buildings, structures and properties in the District with the exception of 1 & 2 family dwellings in which the owner of the property resides. Due to ECCFPD's current funding and staffing levels, the District contracts out Prevention services to Contra Costa County Fire Protection District (CCCFPD).”

The East Bay Times newspaper published an exemplary piece of journalism on the state of area fire inspections on June 1, 2018.

The newspaper's research identified 31 schools in the ECCFPD service area and measured “...how well 11 of the largest fire agencies in the region follow the state mandate to perform yearly fire inspections at K-12 public and private schools.”

Eighteen of the 31 schools were categorized in the “0-25% Overdue” category, ten schools were in the “25-50% Overdue” category, and three schools were in the “50-75% Overdue” category.

The entire article can be read on the Internet here: <http://extras.mercurynews.com/fireinspection/>

Several area residents rose during Public Comments on the financial issue and questioned the transaction and the speed with which a decision was being made. One resident called the transaction a “shell game,” while another questioned whether there was a need to move forward since ECCFPD has no operating funds sufficient to man the new fire station.

A video recording of the meeting, as well as the agenda, Board packet, and other materials can be found online at the ECCFPD website.

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