

August 14, 2013

Agenda Item 13d

Barnidge: Contra Costa Fire District has lots of problems, no clear answers

By Tom Barnidge Contra Costa Times Columnist Contra Costa Times
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ContraCostaTimes.com

Anyone who questions the consequences of budget and staffing cuts to the Contra Costa Fire District needs to hear what happened July 1. Chief Daryl Louder laid out the scene for county supervisors last week.

"We had a 500-acre fire on Kirker Pass, with structures threatened," he said. "It was the equivalent of three alarms, with 50 percent of our resources committed to that incident. Concurrent with that, East County had a significant wildland fire and utilized a number of our resources as part of our mutual aid process. Also concurrently, we had what started as a vegetation fire and became a structure fire that threatened other structures in downtown Concord."

Resources were so overtaxed, he said, that neighboring districts had to cover for ConFire stations and response to medical emergencies was cut off for all but serious, life-threatening calls.

In the world of public safety, those are scary consequences.

Ever since a November parcel tax failed and the district began trimming costs -- Pittsburg station No. 87 recently became the fifth to close -- the search for operational solutions has meant long meetings for supervisors, who double as district board members.

Last week's agenda items included the district's three-year budget picture (not good, even with rising property taxes), a proposed partnership with the Moraga-Orinda district (if operating expenses can be delayed) and an emergency-response program utilizing two-person teams (panned by two firefighters in attendance).

The general mood might be categorized as grasping at straws. When expenditures outpace revenues, that's inevitable. So are questions about priorities.

Take the shared firehouse with MOFD, a move that would replace shuttered Station 16, the northernmost of three Lafayette stations. The idea is sound, but should it come ahead of restoring full service to Clayton's only station?

"If we had enough money to open Clayton or Lafayette, which one would you open?" Supervisor John Gioia asked.

"From a public safety standpoint, I would open Clayton first," Louder said. "But actually, I would first reopen Station 87 in Pittsburg, which we just closed. But I also can tell you that greatest (station closure) impact to date has been in Walnut Creek."

So, Chief, which of your children do you want to keep, because you can't afford to feed them all ...

For now, the district can't afford any new operational expenses. (The MOFD deal is possible only because it would be funded from capital expenditure reserves.) But even if money fell from the sky, there would be hard questions about how to deploy it. We haven't even mentioned the closed station in Martinez.

Louder endorses the MOFD partnership because of its long-term benefit and because it solves at least one of his problems. Reopening one of five stations is better than reopening none.

In furthering his case, he told supervisors, "West Lafayette is not protected now."

To which Supervisor Karen Mitchoff responded: "Neither is Clayton."

The district is doing more than wringing its hands. It has hired a consultant to study its operation and propose a new model that streamlines expenses, but answers are needed soon. Otherwise another station will be selected for closure in January.

And questions about priorities will resume.

Contact Tom Barnidge at tbarnidge@bayareanewsgroup.com.

El Cerrito firefighting equipment bolstered by grant

By Rick Radin Correspondent Contra Costa Times

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EL CERRITO -- The city's fire department has received an \$856,804 federal grant to replace its aging ladder truck with a new model.

The old truck, a 1991 model with 95,000 miles on it, is based at Station 71, across from City Hall at San Pablo and Manila avenues, said El Cerrito Fire Chief Lance Maples.

The city is kicking in \$95,156 from its general fund to supplement the grant, he said.

The department also provides fire service under contract to unincorporated Kensington.

Besides the ladder truck, the department has four fire engines at two stations in El Cerrito. The department also staffs the Kensington fire station, which has a fire engine and a fire truck, said Mayor Pro Tem Janet Abelson

The grant, from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, is based in part on need, Maples said.

The fire department's budget of \$7.977 million for 2013-14 has barely budged over the past two years, leaving no money left over for large equipment purchases.

"We desperately needed to replace this piece of equipment, and we had no other funding source for this," Abelson said.

The department has 34 firefighters and is covering three vacant positions with overtime to save money, but there have been no layoffs and no station closures, Maples said.

About 90 percent of the department's budget goes to personnel, he said.

"We haven't been hit as bad as some (nearby) departments, but we're at a bare bones budget," Maples said.

The fire department has also cut funding for consultants, firefighters' physical exams and training.

The city received a grant to install solar energy systems at fire stations, City Hall and the police station that dropped annual utilities costs for the fire department from \$35,000 to \$12,000, Maples said.

The department has received about \$2 million in state and federal grants since 2006, including the current grant, he said.

Employees, meanwhile, received an average raise of about 1 percent for 2013-14, Maples said, adding that firefighters' salaries are based on comparisons with those of departments in surrounding communities.

The fire department will try to sell the old truck, which is worth \$25,000 to \$40,000 on the open market, Maples said.

"It will wind up going to a department that is in a tougher market than everyone else," he said.
"There's no point for us investing money in new motors and transmissions when the chassis is failing."

Maples credited Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, for having a big hand in helping obtain the grant.

"He has been very supportive of the federal program," Maples said.

FEMA's Assistance to Firefighters' Grants program has provided about \$5.25 billion in grants for protective equipment, firefighting and emergency vehicles, and training, according to Miller's Washington, D.C., office.

Moraga-Orinda Fire District moving forward with \$1.2 million Lafayette land purchase; residents push back

By Jennifer Modenessi Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times
Posted:

Wednesday, July 17, 2013
ContraCostaTimes.com

MORAGA -- The Lafayette City Council is set to vote July 22 on an agreement with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District for purchase a \$1.2 million parcel of land on the district's behalf, using the district's money, for a jointly operated fire station.

The agreement would permit Lafayette officials to buy the property for the district, as the district is legally prohibited from acquiring land outside its boundaries. The city would then hold on to the 2.33-acre parcel until the district can form a partnership with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District or other entity to construct the new fire station officials have estimated could cost between \$5 to \$6 million to design and build.

The Moraga-Orinda district must close escrow by July 25.

A nearby fire station on Charles Hill Road in Orinda would close as part of the deal; fire officials have argued the new joint station would provide better response times to Orinda and Lafayette residents -- an argument some district residents dispute.

Lafayette officials have been exploring alternatives to fire service, including possibly leaving ConFire and joining the Moraga-Orinda district, after the county closed a fire station in the western portion of the city in January due to budget cuts and a failed parcel tax measure.

Bradley -- who Tuesday took over as chief of the Modesto Regional Fire Authority -- reiterated this week his support for the land buy, and said he believed the district can reach a partnership agreement with ConFire.

And while he didn't provide any specific details, Bradley hinted that the agreement may not resemble the plan departing ConFire Chief Daryl Louder offered at a Contra Costa County supervisors meeting last week. Louder proposed the county would not pay for the station's operating and staffing costs until its finances stabilize.

"ConFire is a viable partner. They have stepped up and created another offer. I don't think it's a good offer. It's not an offer that I have agreed to or proposed, but at least they're willing to negotiate," Bradley said.

After hearing Louder's proposal July 9, county supervisors -- a majority of whom previously voted against the partnership, citing ConFire's financial turmoil -- agreed to allow Louder to resume negotiations with the Moraga-Orinda district.

Should Lafayette officials decide to greenlight the agreement, they would use the district's capital funds to buy the 2.33-acre parcel. The purchase agreement also includes another \$15,000 deposit to be paid to the property owners, one of whom is acting as the property broker. The district lost a \$15,000 deposit last May after a board majority voted to withdraw from an earlier purchase agreement.

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District board on Monday greenlighted the agreement with the city of Lafayette. Directors Stephen Anderson, Vice President Alex Evans and board president John Wyro also approved the "joint powers agreement." Director Fred Weil dissented.

The board's approval came despite fierce opposition from some Orinda and Moraga residents. Former board member and Moraga resident Dick Olsen questioned the legality of the agreement, arguing the city of Lafayette doesn't and currently can't legally provide fire services to its residents, therefore making a joint powers agreement impossible. He also cautioned that the purchase funds will come solely from Moraga and Orinda taxpayers, and since no security or other assets or interest are being provided by the city in exchange for the money, the district could be making an "illegal gift of public funds" to Lafayette.

Orinda resident Jerry Dimsdale warned of other consequences.

"The problem appears to be this board moving forward in a direction that the residents do not want, your constituency does not want," he said. "There has come into question some legal issues associated with the funding that you want to pursue. I think you need to put something in your budget for legal defense because of what illegal activities you want to pursue."

Lafayette OK's fire district land buy

By Jennifer Modenessi Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

Posted:

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ContraCostaTimes.com

LAFAYETTE -- City officials have approved an agreement to buy a piece of land where a proposed new fire station serving residents of Lafayette and Orinda would be built.

Lafayette Mayor Mike Anderson, Councilman Brandt Andersson and Councilwoman Traci Reilly approved entering the joint powers agreement Monday with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District that will allow the city to use district funds to purchase the 3.2-acre Lorinda Lane property because MOFD can't acquire land outside its boundaries.

Councilman Mark Mitchell and Vice Mayor Don Tatzin were absent and did not vote.

The site, on the Lafayette-Orinda border, has been pitched as the future home of a fire station to replace the closed Contra Costa County Fire Protection District station in western Lafayette and an MOFD station in east Orinda slated for reconstruction. Interim fire Chief Stephen Healy said the district plans to close escrow on the \$1.225 million property Friday.

The agreement allows the fire district to hold the property while it finds a partner to help with the station's construction, operation and staffing. It also will allow the current owners to lease the home on the property for up to 18 months and to negotiate for the purchase of some of the property should it be subdivided.

While highly contentious in Orinda, it hasn't been in Lafayette, where officials did not schedule a full public hearing for the agreement. Still, Mayor Mike Anderson opened the item to public comment Monday, saying he felt people wanted to speak about the agreement. A handful of Orindans shared their concerns, including a resident who cautioned the city about ConFire's suitability as a partner given its financial turmoil and the recent spate of station closures.

"While MOFD tries to figure out how to convince ConFire to raise the money to build Station 46, where would that leave the citizens of Lafayette?" said Orinda resident Scott Fink. "Does it make sense for Lafayette to bet that ConFire is going to come up with this money somehow to build Station 46 any time soon when it's closing stations left and right?"

ConFire and MOFD officials are hammering out a potential partnership to divide station costs.

MOFD's Healy said that once the district acquires the land, Station 43 will continue to operate until the new station is built. The district would most likely then sell the Station 43 property.

Pittsburg: Old lap pool at Ambrose Park to be re-opened

By Eve Mitchell Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News

Posted:

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ContraCostaTimes.com

PITTSBURG -- Everyone in the pool.

That looks to be the outcome of what improvements are in store for the long-neglected Ambrose Park.

"We've heard you loud and clear -- the pool needs to be reopened," Steve Hoagland, chairman of the park district's board of directors, said at the third of four public workshops Thursday on how best to spend available funds on improvements to Ambrose Park. An earlier plan to build a children's pool fell through last year because bids were too high.

But while there appears to be a plan for the pool, residents also pitched ideas for other unfunded improvements such as tennis courts, a multiuse field, a performance space, basketball hoops, bocce courts, hiking trails, a dog park and a barbecue area.

Ambrose Park is in Pittsburg near the Pittsburg-Bay Point BART station, but the 12-acre property is owned and maintained by the Ambrose Recreation and Park District.

The old lap pool, which was closed in 2009 for safety reasons, will be repaired and reopened under a plan announced by the park district, something that many residents have been supporting for years.

Board members had originally supported a children's pool on the basis that it would have lower maintenance costs than a traditional lap pool. But that plan was sunk when the lowest construction bid came in \$700,000 higher than available funding, opening the door for the old pool to be back in the picture.

"For the community, I believe a big pool is a lot better, because that's what Bay Point is known for," said Victor Ramirez, who like many locals swam in the pool as children.

"Any plan without a pool-sized swimming pool is unacceptable," said Jeff Minnick Jr. "The kids are sneaking into apartment complexes to swim. We definitely need a swimming pool."

The next step toward making that happen is for the board to make a formal request at its Aug. 8 meeting to authorize interim general manager John De Lorenzo to take the initial steps needed so that the existing pool and buildings can be repaired and opened with available funds. A progress report on where things stand will then be made at the fourth and final public workshop to be held Sept. 7 at 10 a.m. at the Ambrose Community Center, 3105 Willow Pass Road, Bay Point.

While many details need to be worked out, the plan discussed at Thursday's meeting envisions dividing the 33-yard-long pool with a wall to create a 25-yard deep-water pool for lap swimming, with an 8-yard-long shallow pool to be used by young kids, seniors and for children's swimming lesson.

There is about \$1.5 million in funds available that could be used for the pool project. About \$1.1 million is expected to come from East Bay Regional Park District's Measure WW, a voter-approved bond measure.

De Lorenzo pointed out that revenues sources such as swimming lessons will have to be developed to help pay for the costs of operating the reopened pool, which in a best-case scenario could be open by next summer. "The pool is not going to pay for itself," he said. But, De Lorenzo said it "is going to generate a source and sense of community pride."

Contact Eve Mitchell at 925-779-7189. Follow her on Twitter.com/EastCounty_Girl.

Antioch to consider long-awaited annexation of northeast waterfront area

By Paul Burgarino Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Monday, July 29, 2013
ContraCostaTimes.com

ANTIOCH -- After years of hang-ups over environmental and money-sharing issues, city leaders this week will consider giving the go-ahead to annexing 678 acres to its northeast.

Antioch and Contra Costa County officials have worked to hash out a complex package that would bring within city limits two natural gas-fired power plants, including NRG Energy's new 760-megawatt facility, and industrial waterfront land. It also includes a rural neighborhood off Viera Avenue, where a majority of residents vehemently oppose the move.

The City Council will consider approving two items Tuesday night -- a package of environmental and zoning documents, along with an agreement between Antioch and the county on how to split area tax revenue and pay for infrastructure costs in the Viera neighborhood.

Final adoption of the items would be slated for Aug. 13.

If approved, the plans would be considered by county supervisors before heading to the formation commission, likely by late fall.

"We've been working on this for a long while," Mayor Pro Tem Mary Rocha said. "I'm glad to see it finally coming toward a conclusion on our end. It could be a great opportunity for economic development."

The city estimates the area could yield a net of \$800,000 to \$900,000 in new yearly tax revenue and provide other economic opportunities on the waterfront, according to a draft tax transfer agreement.

Antioch estimates it would cost about \$10.7 million, plus other engineering and contingency costs, to add the infrastructure.

In the agreement, both the city and county would contribute \$3 million over 10 years, with Antioch covering the rest with grants and loans, according to a city staff report.

Antioch initially proposed annexing just the industrial area off Wilbur in 2007. But the county's Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees orderly growth and boundaries, countered by saying Viera must be included to avoid creating a "land island."

Antioch resubmitted an application last June that included the Viera area, which drew international attention in 2009 because of the Jaycee Dugard kidnapping case.

One reason residents are concerned is the cost of \$18,000 to \$20,000 per home to connect to city water and sewer lines and abandon existing septic tank connections.

Residents with properly operating septic systems, however, will not have to hook up to city sewer service, said Victor Carniglia, a city-hired consultant.

Contact Paul Burgarino at 925-779-7164. Follow him at Twitter.com/paulburgarino.

IF YOU GO

What: Antioch City Council meeting

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: City Public Works building, 1204 W. Fourth St.

Information: Call 925-779-7009 or go to www.ci.antioch.ca.us.

Antioch leaders give nod toward annexation plans

By Paul Burgarino Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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Wednesday, July 31, 2013

ContraCostaTimes.com

ANTIOCH -- With an eye toward making annexation as unobtrusive as possible for residents in an established rural area off Viera Avenue, city leaders this week approved a package of environmental and zoning documents for the area to its northeast.

Antioch and Contra Costa County officials are hashing out a complex plan to bring 678 acres within the city. The proposal is divided into three land swaths: 481 acres of industrial waterfront land that includes two natural gas-fired power plants, 94 acres of marina and storage uses, and 103 acres of isolated properties off Viera.

Though the industrial area is the part Antioch covets for its revenue potential, the county agency that manages orderly growth and boundaries says the Viera area, which drew international attention in 2009 because of the Jaycee Dugard kidnapping case, must be included.

The City Council added several provisions Tuesday to minimize costs for residents, including directing staff to work with the county and NRG Energy to find a way to cover connection costs for city water and sewer lines. One of the main concerns for residents, many of whom are on limited income, is the high price tag of \$18,000 to \$20,000 per home.

"We should not put an undue burden or hardship on that portion of the community. They're not asking for (annexation)," Mayor Wade Harper said.

Antioch also agreed to waive annexation fees of \$1,634 per acre and allow residents to continue using septic tanks and water wells, provided they meet county health standards.

The city is also looking to create zoning that fits the rural character of the area, which would allow existing narrow streets, livestock, vineyards and home-based businesses, while leaving private roads alone.

"At the end of the day, it should be little to no cost to the people that live in that area," Councilman Gary Agopian said. "We want to make sure people are done right. We should give residents the opportunity to improve their way of life, and it's their choice how they do that."

Victor Carniglia, a city-hired consultant, said Antioch is discussing having NRG put the \$2 million it offered the city and county toward connection costs. The money is an incentive to complete annexation for NRG's new 760-megawatt facility.

The city and county would contribute \$3 million over 10 years to add water, sewer and storm drains, with Antioch covering the rest with grants and loans, according to a draft infrastructure plan and tax-sharing agreement presented this week. The city estimates it would cost about \$10.7 million, plus nearly \$5 million in other engineering and contingency costs, to add the infrastructure.

Despite the council action, most residents in attendance Tuesday remained leery of the process, while reaffirming their anti-annexation stance.

Antioch initially proposed annexing just the industrial area off Wilbur in 2007. But the county's Local Agency Formation Commission countered by saying Viera must be included to avoid creating a "land island." Antioch resubmitted its application last June.

A large part of the residents' angst is that the county formation commission may waive their right to vote on the annexation.

Under state law, a formation commission can approve annexation without allowing those in "land islands" a protest vote, provided the island is smaller than 150 acres and substantially surrounded by a city or adjacent cities.

The formation commission's decision to handle the annexation in three pieces is not permitted, and the entire area should be considered together, said resident John Mitisinka, basing his argument on an opinion from the state attorney general's office. That would require that all affected residents have a chance to vote.

"They've drawn up the pieces in such a way that it circumvents our right to vote," he said.

Antioch estimates the area could yield a net of \$800,000 to \$900,000 in new tax revenue each year and provide other economic opportunities on the waterfront.

Antioch will consider final adoption of the items on Aug. 13. If approved, the plans would be considered by county supervisors before heading to the county's formation commission, likely by late fall.

Contact Paul Burgarino at 925-779-7164. Follow him at Twitter.com/paulburgarino.