



Board of Supervisors agree to aid East Contra Costa Fire Protection District

Staff Writer

Nov 18, 2015

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors has approved one-time funds for the [East Contra Costa Fire Protection District](#) (ECCFPD) to open a fourth station in an agreement that includes a series of stipulations.

The supervisors will pledge close to \$312,000 to the beleaguered district, provided that its appointed board switch to an elected body; the district changes its name; Station 94 in Knightsen is the station reopened; and an oversight board be created to supervise revenue generated through any future ballot measures. The item was approved with a 4-1 vote, with District II Supervisor Candace Andersen dissenting.

The ECCFPD, comprised of eight stations in 2008, is down to three stations that serve 105,000 residents spanning 249 square miles.

“I believe these requests are common sense,” said District III Supervisor and Discovery Bay resident Mary Piepho. “I feel they help build trust in the communities that they will be used to increase funding for this district to move it into the 21st century.”

The county’s funds are expected to be combined with contributions from the fire district and cities of Oakley and Brentwood to reopen the Knightsen station, while a multi-jurisdictional task force works on a long-term fix for the financially strapped agency. The agreement is expected to be finalized by the ECCFPD Board at its Dec. 7 meeting.

Under the agreement, the ECCFPD would pay \$874,000; Brentwood \$660,000; Oakley \$382,000; and the county close to \$312,000, which should be enough to keep the station open between January 2016 and June 2017. The contributions were decided based on call-volume numbers in the respective areas.

ECCPD Fire Chief Hugh Henderson said it could take the district until March or April to hire firefighters to reopen a fourth station, but the delay could free-up extra funds to explore a revenue-generating measure for the district in 2016.

“(The county funds) is something to get them to the ballot,” said Contra Costa Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Carman, whose agency must assist ECCFPD units in every structure-fire

response. “That is something I think that needs to be understood by the citizens. The ballot measure is the ongoing funding that the district needs to sustain itself.”

Anderson, the lone supervisor to oppose the county’s funding pledge, said she feared the move could create a precedent.

“I’m concerned with us providing one-time money,” she said. “Voters will continue to think there will be someone there who can continue to bail them out, because there always has been in the past.”

While the county’s money is expected to help the ECCFPD, it won’t come without changes by the district.

Piepho said that the ECCFPD Board needs to be an elected body, to allow residents to choose the people to make crucial decisions as opposed to allowing the county and cities of Brentwood and Oakley to appoint the representatives. She also said that the ECCFPD needs to change its name to separate it from the similar Contra Costa Fire Protection District and to prevent the public from believing that the board of supervisors is responsible for the future and status of the district. The demand that the fourth station be reopened in the supervisors’ jurisdiction of Knightsen appears to align with the recommendation of ECCFPD officials. That station was the last one closed when the district dropped from four to three stations in May.

“This is the only time that we have leverage … to get these things moving forward,” Piepho said. “They should have been moved forward eight years ago (when the county relinquished oversight of the ECCFPD).”

Henderson said that reopening a fourth station would help the district for now, until a sorely needed long-term funding fix is found.

“This is a Band-Aid solution when what we really need is a tourniquet,” he said.

Barnidge: Contra Costa County's new approach to emergency medical response brings hope, uncertainty

By Tom Barnidge Contra Costa Times Columnist

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Contra Costa Fire District Chief Jeff Carman has heard the question throughout his career, whenever a fire engine and an ambulance would show up at the same medical emergency: Why did you send both vehicles?

"My response was always the same," he said. "I just sent one. (The ambulance company) sent the other."

Because old habits die hard, that policy has gone unchallenged for years. But procedures will change for Carman's district beginning Jan. 1, 2016.

Thanks to a public-private partnership that brings ambulance provider American Medical Response and Confire's first responders under one umbrella, emergency response is expected to become not only quicker but more efficient.

"We've run these parallel businesses for so long that finally being able to integrate them, I think, will be a model for others," Carman said. "We're getting calls from all over the nation asking about this."

Under the new arrangement, all calls for service will go through the fire district's dispatch center; the severity of the emergency and proximity of first responders will dictate which is dispatched. Only high-level needs, for which two paramedics are needed, are likely to see both an ambulance and engine arrive on scene.

This partnership, believed to be the first of its kind in the state, was hammered out over long hours of brainstorming. Carman said he began with a blank slate, intent only on finding a better way to do things. Several business models were proposed.

"When we originally looked at it," he said, "we thought we'd do it all ourselves. Over time, that evolved into a public-private hybrid."

The new approach promises to free up more firefighters for fighting fires, but it comes with some financial risks. When AMR owned the ambulance contract, it was responsible for collecting transport fees. (There were 63,488 ambulance transports in 2014.) Now, subcontractor AMR will be paid a flat fee, and Confire, which will oversee the operation, will do the billing, collecting and bookkeeping.

Recent history suggests the new EMS operation should take in about \$2 million more than it spends, but if the number of transports declines or the payback rate disappoints, that could change. Private insurers typically pay higher fees than Medicare and Medi-Cal, whose subscribers account for a large percentage of those requiring service.

"The biggest risk," Carman said, "is the Affordable Care Act. Nobody knows what medical care is going to look like in the future. I'm talking about reimbursement rates."

Still, the independent consultant (Citygate Associates) that reviewed the plan largely gave its blessing. It said the assumptions were conservative and the projections realistic.

County Supervisor John Gioia, who joined colleagues in voting unanimous approval of the plan, said there were important advantages beyond the potential financial upside. Quicker response times could mean saved lives, and he said he spoke from experience.

"As someone who's experienced the impact of delayed response times, I know how important that is," he said, explaining that his father, who died at 58 after suffering cardiac arrest and lapsing into a coma, likely would have lived had he been revived earlier.

After nearly two years of planning, a new chapter in public safety is at hand.

"For me, this is a milestone," Carman said. "Now we have to make it work."

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County moves to redirect water funds

Corey Hunt

Nov 25, 2015

In a unanimous vote, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors has opted to begin a detachment process that could separate the Byron Bethany Irrigation District (BBID) from portions of Discovery Bay – a decision that the water provider says is irresponsible.

As it stands today, BBID's jurisdiction overlaps with six tax zones in the small community of 14,000 residents. This means the district has been quietly taking in nearly \$700,000 from many of them yearly, even though the district is not actually providing any service.

The situation stems from a decades-old mapping layout, where BBID provided irrigation to farmlands that have long since been replaced by neighborhood developments. These homes receive water from Discovery Bay's domestic groundwater wells, but still pay property taxes to BBID, supposedly because the zones may require district supplies in the not-so-distant future.

District III Supervisor Mary Piepho, who drafted the motion for detachment, charged that this is unacceptable and tax revenue should go to more appropriate agencies, such as the strained East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD), that provide relevant services to residents. According to Piepho, the district was advised as far back as 1993, and as recently as last year, by the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) – the entity that sets the boundaries for local governing parties – to withdraw from Discovery Bay.

“It is part of my responsibility to see that the taxpayers in my district and Contra Costa County are adequately represented and tax dollars are put to their highest and best use,” Piepho said in a letter sent to BBID’s board of directors after the decision was announced. “BBID’s collection of hundreds of thousands of dollars from areas of Discovery Bay without (the district’s) ability to provide any service to these residents is a problem that must be corrected.”

The board’s decision paves the way for an application to be formally submitted in the next few weeks to their counterpart LAFCO in San Joaquin County, since this is the principle county that is serviced by BBID. From there, San Joaquin administrators may refer the matter back to the Contra Costa LAFCO, the area where the dispute is taking place – although it is unclear if they will be willing to do so.

While the decision will ultimately be made at the county level, residents of Discovery Bay have mixed feelings on whether or not things need to change.

Described by some as an insurance policy, the main argument for the status quo is that BBID could provide an alternate or blended source of water for the town in the event that its groundwater wells run low or face destabilization. The persistent drought conditions plaguing California have highlighted these worries in recent years.

However, BBID officials themselves admit that this would only be feasible if the town constructed a water treatment plant similar to one used by its customers in Mountain House. The district pulls raw intake from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta that, in its original form, is unsuitable for household use. Such an upgrade would cost as much as \$500 million, they say, in a time when Discovery Bay's leadership insists groundwater supplies will likely remain stable for a decent amount of time.

"I can tell you all day long that we would or would not need that water supply in the future, but the truth is I don't really know, because I'm not an engineer," said Rick Howard, the general manager of Discovery Bay. "Until the science can back it up, we can't definitively say one way or another."

Town officials are assessing the situation with an engineering firm and will have an opportunity to take a position before any decisions are made. They have also been extensively involved in meetings, both with BBID and with the county. At the moment, however, Howard is unable to predict which side they will end up on.

Meanwhile, BBID officials are surprised by the decision and ask the county to slow things down.

"We are absolutely puzzled by the board's premature action on this issue," said BBID Board President Russell Kagehiro. "All interested parties are in the very early stages of the analysis of rates, services and impacts, and the relationship between the town of Discovery Bay and BBID. Without further review of the future water supply needs of (this community), particularly in light of a historic drought, this authorization is irresponsible."

Further perplexing the district is the fact that earlier this month, its own board members had put forward a plan to transfer \$200,000 of tax revenue per year for five years to help alleviate the shortfalls facing ECCFPD. The district, despite its revenue tallies that look good on paper, is also coping with a \$1.5 million fine for violating a water usage curtailment notice, along with other litigation. These points are expected to be made when BBID, like Discovery Bay, is given a chance to confront the resolution later in the proceedings.

A decision on BBID's future in Discovery Bay is expected sometime next year.

Daniel Borenstein: Rodeo-Hercules Fire District must not skirt election rules or short firefighters' pension fund.

[By Daniel Borenstein, staff columnist dborenstein@bayareanewsgroup.com](#)

Posted: 11/20/2015 06:57:22 AM PST Updated: 4 days ago



The financially strapped Rodeo-Hercules Fire District faces huge challenges. (Staff archives)

Desperate times call for desperate measures, but there are limits to how far public officials should go.

The financially strapped Rodeo-Hercules Fire District faces huge challenges. But that doesn't excuse legally questionable property assessments or shorting funding for firefighters' pensions.

The district's current struggles stem largely from its unusually small portion of property tax dollars and large payments on its pension debt. It's going to get worse: The current \$7 million of annual revenues will decline by roughly \$2 million by mid-2017. Unless new money appears, the district will have to again close one of its two fire stations.

The situation is "very, very bleak," says board member Ernie Wheeler. "We've got 18 months to come up with the money and I don't know where it's coming from."

The only things keeping the station open now are short-term grants and dubious property assessment receipts.

District leaders realized they were on shaky ground in 2014 when they proposed the assessment plan. "From the get-go we knew there were questions about it," said Beth Bartke, fire board chairwoman. "We knew that it was iffy."

The district could have sought a traditional property tax increase, but that would have required approval by two-thirds of voters. Instead, they sought an assessment, which requires majority approval of property owners.

It's a process established under Proposition 218, a 1996 statewide initiative. In assessment district elections, each vote is weighted by the size of the charge on that parcel. The Rodeo-Hercules assessment plan received 57 percent approval.

But Prop. 218 was intended to cover the cost of "special benefits" for property owners. It cannot include "general benefits" enjoyed by all. Thus, the assessment might take into account individual factors affecting a property's vulnerability to fire, such as structure size and type of construction. Instead, in Rodeo and Hercules, all single-family residences on less than an acre are charged the same \$82 fee.

Hercules resident Thomas Pearson sued to block the assessment, alleging it doesn't comply with Prop. 218 because the fee is really for general benefits. On Nov. 2, as the judge was preparing a ruling, Pearson and the district settled the litigation. They agreed the assessment, originally to be permanent, will end in 2017, after the third year.

The district paid Pearson's attorney \$175,000 in legal fees. And, because they settled before the judge ruled, there will be no court determination of whether the nearly \$1 million in annual assessments the district collects are legal.

Meanwhile, the fire district sought reduction of its annual pension payments to the Contra Costa retirement system. The district, like most California public agencies, has not properly funded its pensions and now has a \$15 million shortfall.

It's a liability that the retirement system requires the fire district pay off over no more than 18 years. The district sought to stretch the repayment schedule to 30 years, which Chief Hanley called "a simple restructuring of debt to enable the district to continue its operations."

It would have reduced the district's \$1.4 million annual debt payments by more than \$600,000 a year. However, under the proposed pay-off schedule, the district's debt would have grown for the first 14 years with no reduction of principal until 20 years from now.

The retirement board's attorney, Harvey Leiderman, strenuously advised trustees against the restructuring, noting that the fire district has no long-term financial plan.

"Without a demonstrable ability to resume paying its full pension obligations in the not-too-distant future," he wrote, "... the (fire) district is simply asking for debt relief, which the board has no legal basis to grant."

The pension board was considering the fire district's request at its Oct. 22 meeting when, under questioning, Hanley revealed that the district hadn't been making its payments since July.

Surprised and perturbed trustees conferred privately with their attorney, took no action on the fire district request and instead launched legal action to recover \$403,000 of back payments. Last week, the fire district paid up while the chief complained about the pension board's action.

It's time for fire district leaders to get real. They have serious financial challenges that they can't expect to solve by stiffing their creditors or skirting election rules.

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Discovery Bay tax dollars flowing to out-of-town water district

By Matthew Artz martz@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 11/25/2015 07:02:01 AM PST Updated: about 3 hours ago

DISCOVERY BAY -- East County residents have been told for years they don't pay enough taxes to support their understaffed fire district. But in Discovery Bay, many residents are only now learning that millions of their tax dollars over the past two decades have been going to a water district that doesn't provide them with any water.

The Byron Bethany Irrigation District, formed long before Discovery Bay was ever developed, has been collecting property tax dollars -- last year totaling \$685,000 -- from sections of town even though it only provides untreated agricultural water to 160 farms in Contra Costa, Alameda and San Joaquin counties and the town of Mountain House.

Discovery Bay's water is provided by the town's Community Service District, which also gets a share of property tax dollars.

An initial push to redraw Byron Bethany's boundaries out of Discovery Bay in 1993 never was carried out. Now Contra Costa County is trying to finally make it happen.

"Government agencies should not receive tax revenue from taxpayers when the agency is not providing a service," said Supervisor Mary Piepho, who lives in Discovery Bay.

Discovery Bay resident Bob Mankin said \$604 from his property tax bill went to Byron Bethany last year -- more than triple the amount earmarked for the East Contra Costa Fire District.

"It's completely ridiculous, particularly when agencies like the fire district are sort of sucking wind," he said.

If the county is finally able to "detach" the irrigation district from Discovery Bay it could boost fire district funding, while dealing a blow to Byron-Bethany, which counts on the town for 16 percent of its property tax revenue.

"Rates will have to be increased," Byron Bethany Executive Director Rick Gilmore said.

It's fairly common to find public utilities with overlapping jurisdictions, but "the unique thing about this situation is that the irrigation district does not provide water service to those overlap areas," said Lou Ann Texeira of the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission. The agency, known as LAFCO, uncovered the overlap in 1993 and noted it again in a report last year.

Byron Bethany's boundaries had long included sections of Discovery Bay, mostly on the town's west side. Gilmore said the irrigation district kept collecting taxes after the 1993 LAFCO report because it was a potential future supply of water for the town.

But county officials say Byron Bethany would be an illogical choice as a water supplier since it would have to build a multimillion dollar treatment plant to make its untreated water drinkable.

Last week, the board of supervisors petitioned San Joaquin County LAFCO, which has jurisdiction over Byron Bethany, to finally redraw the irrigation district's boundaries to exclude Discovery Bay. A ruling is expected within six months.

If approved, taxpayers wouldn't pay any less, but Byron Bethany would no longer be one of the many local agencies getting a share of property taxes. That means there would be more money for the school district, the fire district and other taxing entities.

County officials are hoping that other taxing agencies would agree to let the funds flow to the fire district, which gets a relatively small share of tax revenue and has gone from eight to three stations covering 249 square miles. The fire district needs an estimated \$4.5 million to fully restore services.

The impact on Byron Bethany remains unclear. The irrigation district posted \$4.79 million in net income last year, but Gilmore noted that the potential loss of the Discovery Bay revenue comes on the heels of a \$1.5 million fine from state water regulators for illegally diverting water, as well as ongoing litigation.

"Everything is interconnected," said Gilmore, who wouldn't rule out fighting to keep Discovery Bay. "We're willing to sit down ... and reach an appropriate resolution."

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LAFCO essential for good planning

Westside Connect.com (Stanislaus County)

Posted: Tuesday, November 24, 2015 8:53 am

BY JIM DEMARTINI/COUNTY SUPERVISOR

Most people know that planning commissions are responsible for reviewing and acting on matters related to land-use planning and development, but how many of us know what LAFCO is? Local Agency Formation Commissions, or LAFCOs, were created by the legislature in 1963 in response to California's booming population growth, sprawl of cities and the proliferation of limited purpose special districts. LAFCOs are unique to California and exist in all 58 counties.

California law gives LAFCOs three main purposes: discouraging urban sprawl, encouraging orderly government boundaries and preserving open space and prime agricultural land. LAFCOs do this by reviewing applications for city annexations, extension of services and municipal service reviews of special districts. Stanislaus LAFCO oversees boundaries for the nine cities and 74 special districts in the county, ranging from irrigation districts to mosquito abatement districts and everything in between. LAFCO also adopts future boundaries for each of these agencies, as well as for the cities. These boundaries are known as "spheres of influence," LAFCOs conduct studies about the services these cities and districts provide. LAFCOs also have the authority to eliminate a special district if it no longer serves a useful function. Although this is rarely done, it did happen to a Bay Area hospital district in 2012.

When applying for a new annexation, cities must demonstrate to LAFCO that they will have the ability to provide the same level of municipal services that currently exist within city boundaries. Cities must be capable of providing the same services to newly-annexed territory such as adequate police and fire protection, water, sewer service (which might require increased capacity), parks and schools. Stanislaus LAFCO also requires cities to have a strategy for agricultural preservation, such as mitigation for loss of prime farmland or urban limit lines. Annexations are not approved until all conditions are met. This insures orderly boundaries and efficient delivery of public services.

The existence of LAFCOs keeps decisions about growth and provision of services at the local level. The LAFCO process is thorough and allows an opportunity for the public to be involved and provide input on growth in their area. Stanislaus LAFCO has five commissioners; two members of the Board of Supervisors appointed by the Chairman of the Board, two city council members appointed by the mayors of the nine cities and one public member appointed by the city and county members. There are alternates for each seat on the commission to insure there is always a quorum. The commission is intended to represent the interest of the county as a whole and not solely the interest of a voting member's jurisdiction. In fact it is improper for appointing bodies, whether it be the county or the cities, to require a LAFCO commissioner to vote a certain way. All commissioners take off their county, city or special district hats and sit as members of a truly independent body. LAFCO responsibilities can involve competing interests, for instance

promoting orderly development and efficient services while also preserving agricultural land. Commissioners are often tasked with difficult decisions which impact our valuable and limited resources such as water and agricultural land. Ultimately, LAFCOs act as the checks and balances for boundaries and services in the county. Three years ago Stanislaus LAFCO received the state LAFCO's highest award, Most Effective Commission, and Project of the Year for our Agricultural Preservation Policy. This year, in competition with all of California's 58 LAFCOs, former commissioner Matt Beekman received the award for Commissioner of the Year.

LAFCOs exercise independent judgment involving a broad perspective representing the public as a whole. City annexation wars, leap-frog development and urban sprawl have essentially been eliminated in California by LAFCO commissions. LAFCOs are all about good governance and a better quality of life for all Californians.

Jim DeMartini is the District 5 Stanislaus County Supervisor. His district includes the West Side.

Tracy Press

BBID may lose Discovery Bay tax base

Posted: Thursday, November 26, 2015 10:30 am

Press staff report

Representatives of the Byron Bethany Irrigation District have declared that they look forward to meeting with Contra Costa County and Discovery Bay officials about the possibility that some of Discovery Bay will be removed from the irrigation district.

The BBID board, which met Monday, agreed to open the discussions after Contra Costa County supervisors voted Nov. 17 to ask the Local Agency Formation Commission in San Joaquin County to consider detaching a portion of the town of Discovery Bay from BBID.

Discovery Bay is an unincorporated community in eastern Contra Costa County, but San Joaquin County LAFCO is involved because the majority of land in BBID is in San Joaquin County.

BBID's service area overlaps with the Discovery Bay Community Services District.

Irrigation district directors agreed that the possible loss of the Discovery Bay tax base from the district "represents a hasty, premature step with unknown implications."

In a news release, the BBID board said, "Currently, the property tax revenue paid by the affected residents in the Town of Discovery Bay helps ensure the future water supply of the growing residential community."

Russell Kagehiro of Tracy, president of the BBID board, declared that having BBID, Contra Costa County and Discovery Bay all included in the discussion "was essential to ensure an open dialogue" with all stakeholders was maintained.

"There are many potential consequences with detachment," he said. "This is not a decision that can be made too hastily, and the conversation needs to include everyone."

Barnidge: Understaffed East Contra Costa Fire District can no longer be ignored

By Tom Barnidge Contra Costa Times Columnist

Posted: 11/27/2015 10:45:55 AM PST Updated: 2 days ago

Because most people don't think about emergency response until an emergency interrupts their lives, residents of the East Contra Costa Fire District may not be aware of the precarious condition in which they live.

The district, hobbled by inadequate funding, has only three engine companies -- nine firefighters -- on call to answer the needs of 110,000 residents spread across 249 square miles. This "unacceptable staffing level" -- Chief Hugh Henderson's words -- puts at risk the communities of Brentwood, Oakley, Knightsen, Bethel Island and Discovery Bay, and not just because response times have worsened.



A sign notifies people that the East Contra Costa Fire Station 54 has been closed for service in Brentwood on Sept. 28, 2015. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

The harsh reality is that a structure fire requires a minimum of five trucks, or two more than the district has on call. That means mutual aid is needed from elsewhere, usually Contra Costa Fire's Antioch stations, and if a second emergency unfolds, well, good luck with that.

Henderson offered some context when he appeared before county supervisors recently.

He said a fire in Discovery Bay on Oct. 28 kept all his resources occupied for more than seven hours, during which they couldn't respond to any of three major medical emergencies the same day -- a man with a diabetic seizure in Oakley, a woman found unconscious in Discovery Bay and an elderly Oakley woman suffering chest pains and breathing problems. Ambulances were sent, but in one case the nearest was 15 minutes away.

There were similar stories involving a fire in Brentwood on July 24 and a multcar collision on Marsh Creek Road on Sept. 3. In the latter instance, five victims from three cars needed aid that included extrication with the Jaws of Life. By Henderson's count, there have been at least 16

instances in recent months when all resources were occupied and unavailable elsewhere. God forbid if there were a fire call then.

That's why a special task force was formed and why, after several meetings, it agreed to temporarily fund a fourth station and lobby public support for a sustainable solution. One-time funds -- \$666,000 from Brentwood, \$382,202 from Oakley and \$311,617 from the county -- will enable the district to reopen its shuttered Knightsen station for 18 months. Long-term funding is a trickier proposition because it's expected to mean a ballot initiative next year.

Voters twice have turned down such measures -- a parcel tax in 2012 and a benefit assessment in 2014 -- but proponents think a little education will go a long way in winning support. Residents need to understand, they say, that the district's fiscal problems aren't caused by overspending; its salaries are lower than most. Funding problems trace to East County's roots as farmland and its archaic tax classification as a rural district. Because of that designation, assigned in 1978, it gets only 7 cents of every property tax dollar. Confire, by contrast, gets twice as much.

Before Brentwood, Oakley and neighboring towns became sprawling bedroom communities, a small firefighting force with limited funding was adequate. Now, it's not. As recently as 2008, before property values (and taxes) plummeted, eight stations were in operation; Henderson said 10 are really needed.

"We need to handle this together as a community," said Supervisor Mary Piepho, who lives in Discovery Bay. "That's why there's hope this effort will be different from the last."

If it isn't, East County had better hope that its emergencies are carefully spaced.

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Richmond: City, school district racing the clock to set up Internet

By Karina Ioffee kioffee@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 11/28/2015 02:38:44 PM PST

Updated: 11/29/2015 07:51:07 AM PST



Flower Alonso, 7, of Richmond, smiles as she sees all the computer equipment at Building Blocks for Kids Collaborative in Richmond on Nov. 21, 2015. (Dan Honda/Bay Area News Group)

RICHMOND -- The West Contra Costa school district has an ambitious plan to distribute a tablet computer to each of its 30,000 students starting next year. It's a bold vision, considering that thousands of students have migrated to charter schools over the past decade, resulting in less money for the district.

But there's a small hiccup: Close to 20 percent of households in Richmond, the biggest city in the district, don't have an Internet connection at home, according to the 2014 Census.

In central Richmond, the number is closer to 40 percent, meaning 7,000 households in the city can't easily go online to pay their bills, search for jobs or access the dozens of apps, programs and games meant to supplement what children are learning at school.

The school district, in conjunction with the city and a group of nonprofits, says it's working to close the gaps in coverage, starting with the Iron Triangle neighborhood, home to predominately Latino and African-American families. The district is in the midst of launching a fiber project that will allow the city to install antennas on top of some of its schools, providing a strong signal to not only classrooms but approximately 300 homes in the surrounding area.

"We want to level the playing field and plan to provide free wireless to the neighborhood within three years," said Mary Phillips, the district's chief technology officer.

Meanwhile, Richmond is working to expand its own fiber optic network -- which uses lighter cables that are able to process data at faster rates -- but the city doesn't have enough money.

Instead, it's relying on private and state grants to finance the job, pulling together the funding piece by piece.

"You really need to build the broadband backbone and then connect the dots: the schools and the individual community locations that don't have Internet right now," said Sue Hartman, IT director for the city.

The effort will get a \$1 million boost from Chevron, paid out over the next three years, part of a community benefits agreement secured in exchange for greenlighting a refinery-modernization project, scheduled to start next year.

Meanwhile, a patchwork of nonprofit organizations has formed in recent years to address the challenge, but collaboration has sometimes been tricky. Most are used to working independently and don't always share information, said Jennifer Lyle, executive director of Building Blocks for Kids Collaborative, a coalition of organizations working to connect residents of the Iron Triangle neighborhood to critical services.

When it comes to the Internet, the group has started giving out "hotspots" -- pocket-size devices that create an instant Internet connection -- at \$10.99 a month. So far, it has given out 60 such devices, according to Lyle.

"It's a small piece, but it's better than nothing," she said.

Another player is the Internet Archive, a San Francisco organization that operates a free online repository of books, research papers, audio, video and software. It has set up two towers in Richmond that provide a Wi-Fi signal but requires residents to install their own repeaters on the roof, meaning that technical know-how is essential. About 225 people a day in Richmond go online with the help of Internet Archive, a drop in the sea of digital access.



Residents, including Maurissa O'Keith, left, of Richmond, take a short computer class given by Ellen Kersten, of the City of Richmond Library and Cultural Services, at Building Blocks for Kids Collaborative in Richmond on Nov. 21, 2015. (Dan Honda/Bay Area News Group)

The city has also tried to educate low-income residents who aren't yet online to Comcast's Internet Essentials program, which provides affordable Internet service to families with at least one child who qualifies for the National School Lunch Program.

People working to bridge the digital divide in Richmond have found Internet Essentials frustrating. Among their complaints: Spanish-speaking service representatives who don't tell callers about the program, families who are made ineligible because of disputes over bills, and representatives who try to upsell other services even when customers call inquiring about the specific service.

"Comcast has been unethical in the way they work with low-income families," Lyle said. "It's been a challenge."

Comcast was required by the federal government to create a program for low-income customers as part of its 2011 acquisition of NBC Universal.

Comcast spokesman Bryan Byrd said the company has made numerous changes to the program in recent years, including creating a dedicated call center for both English and Spanish speakers, adding an online application process that can be used on any Internet-enabled device, including a phone, and providing amnesty to families who have a past-due balance older than one year.

"A lot of those concerns have been addressed," Byrd said. "We have a 23 percent penetration rate in California and are one of the few companies that even have such a program."

Phillips, the school district's IT director, says she remains optimistic that all students will soon be able to go online to do their homework. But just in case, some programs will be downloadable onto a computer's hard drive and accessed without a connection, she said.

Lyle is also optimistic that at least children living in the Iron Triangle neighborhood will be able to connect by the start of next school year.

"It makes me so angry that there are so many barriers to getting online, but many other communities have struggled with this," she said. "The fact that the city is even trying to do this is commendable."

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Brentwood's good summer water conservation came at a price

By Nate Gartrell ngartrell@bayareanewsgroup.com

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BRENTWOOD -- The city's response to the drought has been engaging, innovative and effective. As it stands now, officials say residents here have slashed their water use by nearly half of what it was in 2013.

But there is one catch: It turns out that some of the most effective conservation programs have also been costly.

Brentwood's water operations budget lost \$500,000 from April through October alone, because the city handed out more than 45,700 water use rebates while issuing around 6,700 penalties during that seven-month span. This loss occurred even though the highest penalty (\$300) was six times higher than the highest rebate (\$50).

Under the city's system, which had a target of 35 percent water conservation, \$100 fines were given to anyone who conserved 34-21 percent of their 2013 usage. Fines of \$200 were imposed upon residents who conserved by 20 percent or less, and anyone who increased water use was given a \$300 fine. Rebates of \$10, \$25 and \$50 were given to anyone who conserved water by at least 36 percent, at least 41 percent, and at least 50 percent respectively.

Everyone who was exactly at 35 percent conservation got neither a rebate or a penalty, according to city records.

The water budget loss is compounded by the underlying cost of conservation: Because residents pay for water by the unit, the more they conserve, the less revenue they generate. And because drinking water production costs are fixed, and state law limits how water agencies can get revenue, many residents throughout the state are being rewarded for their conservation with an increase in water rates.

Last fiscal year, Brentwood officials say water conservation cost the city \$1.8 million, and it was estimated in a city staff report from April that the shortfall of revenue would cost the city \$3-4 million this fiscal year.

"The issue is that if you conserve, which is the goal, there is less revenue to the fund, and so now you've got to deal with that," said Brentwood City Manager Gus Vina, describing the Catch-22 that water agencies throughout California have found themselves in. "If you don't conserve, then you have a supply-side issue and then you'd get some pretty hefty fines -- \$10,000 a day -- coming from state water boards."

Vina added that city officials are conducting a study of the city's water rates, and might recommend that they be increased, though he added he wouldn't be able to definitively say whether an increase is coming until that study is completed.

But in the short-term, at least, city officials can claim a victory; the city's rebate/penalty records paint a picture of a populace that has taken the drought seriously. Out of the 45,737 rebates that were issued from April 1 through Oct. 31, a majority -- nearly 30,000 -- went to people who were able to cut their water use by more than 50 percent. By contrast, only 2,050 penalties were issued to residents who increased their water usage.

And during the eight weeks before the city eased its emergency drought restrictions, nearly 10 times as many residents were issued rebates than were issued penalties. The city lost nearly three times as much money from handing out rebates during those eight weeks than it lost in five months from April 1 through Sept. 4, when roughly 26,000 rebates were issued, and 4,700 penalties.

"When we went into this, it was more like, 'How do we incentivize conservation and change people's behavior if they don't conserve,'" Vina said. "The impact between penalties and rebates was an unknown, so we launched the plan hoping to get people to conserve. And we made our goal, which is good news."

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SoCal moves in on Delta islands

[Corey Hunt](#)

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Board members at a southern California water provider have given the green light for the agency to examine the purchase of at least four islands on the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, two of which are centered in an area marked for a highly controversial plan to construct two massive tunnels and divert water supplies toward Los Angeles and Central Valley farmers.

[The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California](#) (MWD), the largest provider of treated water in the U.S., says it is interested in purchasing the land, at a cost that could reach hundreds of millions of dollars, for a variety of reasons. These include the opportunity to promote habitat restoration and to a lesser extent, reservoir storage that could be utilized during dry years – as the islands sit below sea level and the present owners have been aiming to do this for a while.

However, it is no secret that MWD is also a staunch supporter of the roughly \$16 billion tunnel project, known as California WaterFix. This is setting off alarm bells for many northern California and Bay Area residents, who have been fighting a lengthy battle against the proposal and any efforts to send additional water south.

The district itself acknowledges control of the islands would brush aside eminent domain regulations that could hold up construction of the 35-mile long, 40-foot-wide tunnels deep under the Delta floor. With the purchase, it would obtain water rights over the area, which is currently owned and managed by Switzerland-based Delta Wetlands Properties. Together, the islands – Bacon Island, Webb Tract, Holland Tract, and Bouldin Island, along with a potential portion of Chipp Island – total about 20,000 acres and primarily serve agricultural needs.

“We’re just getting into this process,” said Armando Acuna, a spokesman for the district. “This decision is not just based on one purpose … there are multiple reasons for the possibility of buying these islands. There is a lot of talk about the tunnels, but while the islands would certainly be helpful should they be constructed, the land will still be useful if the project fails to go forward.”

Acuna explained that one of the aspects MWD is most interested in is habitat restoration, which he said could serve the interests of all parties involved – the district, the Delta, and residents in both areas. The theory is that with a healthier Delta come fewer environmental restrictions, such as those put in place to protect the tiny Delta smelt fish and other wildlife, and subsequently, more water that can be pumped safely. Essentially, the district would get more water flowing

without interruption, and the community would get a healthier Delta that ecologists have long been warning is unsustainable in its current situation.

Ideally, MWD will not be foraying into the purchases alone. The district's general manager, Jeff Kightlinger, said at a press conference shortly after the decision was announced that the board is in talks to work with three other water agencies in Kern County, which stands to gain from the WaterFix project. Those potential partners still have not approved the okay to initiate purchase proceedings though. Overall, the agencies estimate the land value to be around \$200 million based on current prices in the region.

As might be expected given the prevailing tensions, local activists involved with Delta affairs are not convinced that MWD has habitat restoration as its main goal. They say they see the move as a steady encroachment, laying the groundwork for the WaterFix.

"Giving the southern water districts more ownership of land in the Delta is not a good idea," said Jan McCleery, the president of the [Save the California Delta Alliance](#) (STCDA). "If the water agencies in the south inherit the water rights from those islands, they will feel entitled to even more Delta water than now. Anything that aids getting the tunnels approved is bad. (It's obvious that) they do not have the best interests of the Delta or the Delta communities in mind."

McCLEERY added that while a less controversial part of MWD's plan – the reservoir storage component – could have some positive effects in dry years, it would create the need for more dams and wreck havoc on Delta industries that rely on boating and shipping.

Acuna, however, said that MWD is putting limited focus on the reservoirs, and that recent media attention has given this excessive emphasis – as the land may not be as ideal for storage as suggested.

"This is a little bit, in some quarters, exaggerated ... it's certainly not the primary purpose," he said.

Whether or not MWD will move ahead and purchase the islands will be decided sometime next year. The current decision allows a 12-month period to negotiate a deal.



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Supervisor Says No to Struggling Fire District

By Nick Marnell

Supervisor Candace Andersen again refused to allocate money from the county general fund to support a special district when she voted against a \$311,000 bailout of the troubled East Contra Costa Fire Protection District Nov. 17. "When I first came on the board three years ago, we refused to give our own Contra Costa fire district the money they needed so that we would not have to close fire stations," said Andersen, whose district includes Lamorinda. "I cannot justify this one-time expense."

One of those county fire stations she referred to, Contra Costa County Fire Protection District station 16 in Lafayette, remains closed.

"I don't know that I would have supported drawing from the general fund if Lafayette had offered up additional money to keep Station 16 open or reopened," Andersen said later. The county, the fire district and the cities of Brentwood and Oakley will contribute more than \$2 million to the cost of reopening the ECCFPD Knightsen station for 18 months, a stopgap measure until the district finds a way to increase funding for its fire service. "From my perspective, Lafayette taxpayers were already significantly contributing toward their fire service and weren't getting sufficient value for their tax dollars," continued Andersen. "Also, at the time, I had serious concerns about how we were delivering fire service, and wasn't inclined to go to taxpayers or cities and ask for more funding until we had done all that we could to become more efficient and have a plan toward sustainability in place."

Speakers pounded the sustainability of ECCFPD as a recurrent theme. The district dropped from eight fire stations in 2008 to three today, and voters twice rejected calls for additional funding to enhance fire service. "It is not sustainable for East County to draw on our resources at the rate they are using them today," said ConFire chief Jeff Carman. "We're a system. It puts pressure on everybody, including Lafayette."

The supervisors approved the bailout 4-1, but with a list of contingencies, including that ECCFPD pursue status as an independent district, elect its own governing body and change its name. "These things should have been done eight years ago," said Supervisor Mary Piepho.

"The biggest stumbling block for me is the precedent," said Andersen, who earlier this year rejected using general fund money to keep Doctors Medical Center, a special district, open. "We have competing needs in the county. At least one other fire district is in serious financial trouble, and I'm sure there are other districts which could use money too."

"It's a further explanation of why (the supervisors) think they have to do something in Lafayette to open station 16," said Moraga-Orinda Fire District director Fred Weil at the Nov. 18 district meeting. "If they were handing money out to East County and not reopening 16, they would have smelled the tar and seen the feathers out of Lafayette. And for good reason."

The Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force declined to comment on the county's action. "In addition to investigating detachment, we have been focused on the joint station 46, and more recently on reopening station 16. I suspect that that will be our focus until it is accomplished," said co-chair Brandt Andersson. Carman said he plans to present a proposal for the reopening of Lafayette station 16 to his board in December.

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Published December 2nd, 2015

Fire Chief Wraps His Legacy around Ambulance Contract

By Nick Marnell

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District chief Jeff Carman reflected on a painful time in the district. "Fourteen months ago, there were people saying we can't even run a fire department," said the chief. "So how were we going to run an ambulance service?" With the unanimous approval by the Board of Supervisors Nov. 17 for the district to provide county emergency ambulance service, most of Contra Costa County is going to find out how beginning Jan. 1.

Carman joined the struggling fire district in 2013 with a mandate from his board to uncover new revenue sources. "The ambulance contract was the low-hanging fruit," he said. The contract with American Medical Response, the current county ambulance provider, ends in December, and with the possibility of additional government funds available to a public entity for emergency transport, the chief said pitching for the ambulance contract presented an opportunity he could not pass up.

"I started thinking I could do the whole thing myself," said Carman. "But consultants convinced me it wouldn't be worth the trouble. Buying 40 ambulances, buying 40 monitors at \$35,000 each, gurneys at \$20,000 - getting all of that assembled, training a workforce, versus buying an incumbent that knew the county and how to run everything? And do the supervisors have the stomach to tell AMR goodbye? Joining with AMR was the way to go. We benefit from their incredible buying power, plus a labor force that's knowledgeable. And they're cheaper." Citygate Associates LLC, a consulting firm, concluded that the district could net nearly \$2 million in the first year of the ambulance contract.

A potential upside to the deal is that ConFire will be able to collect government reimbursement for emergency transport payable to only public entities, though the dollar amount remains unclear and was not included in financial projections. A possible downside is the future of the Affordable Care Act. "I've gotten a peek behind the curtain at AMR," said Carman. "The depth they have in the EMS arena is incredible. I feel comfortable that nothing emanating from Capitol Hill will surprise us."

ConFire will pay AMR \$200 million to provide ambulance service over the five years of the contract. The district will dispatch the ambulances, eliminating the duplication of resources often seen on medical calls. But the chief said that the dispatch centers will not be completely merged until Feb. 1. "Moving their computer system onto ours, the costs of new hardware. Until (February), that will be the one piece missing, where we can cut down the dispatch time," said Carman.

The regions of Contra Costa County that will not be covered by the ConFire-AMR Alliance are those served by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, which provide their own ambulance service. The district projects that ambulance response times will decrease an average of 30 seconds under the new system.

The chief said one of the toughest challenges of the merger was getting the new billing contractor aligned. "The AMR system has to auto-feed into the Intermedix system. But it will be done by Jan. 1," said Carman.

Advanced Data Processing, Inc, a division of Intermedix, will provide billing for district emergency transport services for an \$8.5 million fee through the life of the 5-year contract.

"What makes me nervous? That so many people are watching. I get calls from Florida, Georgia, Ohio, looking at this," said Carman. Santa Clara and Alameda counties are also eyeing the ConFire business model, which is the first of its kind in California, according to county administrator David Twa. "But I'm very comfortable with the risk we're taking. Nothing really changes for the public," said the chief.

"It's a remarkable accomplishment," said Supervisor Mary Piepho.

Carman agreed that securing the ambulance contract was a career accomplishment, but he hesitated to do a bat flip just yet. "Let me get six months under my belt and then, yeah, I'll agree that this was the way to go."

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MOFD Restores Salary Cut to Firefighters

By Nick Marnell

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District presented its 2014-15 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report Nov. 18, highlighting a general fund surplus of \$1.4 million. Contributing to the surplus was the 3.5 percent wage reduction agreed to by district employees. One percent of the reduction was restored July 1.

With this considerable improvement in district finances, the board agreed to restore the remaining 2.5 percent wage reduction effective Dec. 1, seven months earlier than outlined in the memorandums of understanding between MOFD and its labor groups. The motion passed 3-1, with Steve Anderson dissenting and Alex Evans absent.

"I'm pleased that we're doing this, and I'm happy that we were able to do it," said director Fred Weil.

"This was very difficult," said fire chief Stephen Healy, commenting on the original labor negotiations that resulted in wages lost by the firefighters. "It's kind of a deep wound to them. I'm sorry this had to happen in the first place."

The directors should probably not expect a thank you card from the union. Representative Mark DeWeese blasted the original pay cut as unnecessary, and he said that the elimination of the cut leaves the firefighters with the same pay they were making seven years ago. "If you look at the data in tonight's board packet you'll see MOFD's total revenue over that same time period has grown over 25 percent," he said in a prepared statement. "Our stagnant wages and lagging medical benefits have caused a growing recruitment and retention problem for our district, along with growing frustration among current employees."

"When we worked out that original contract, we needed help to keep MOFD running," Anderson said later. "We were on the edge. The financial situation was impacting our ability to serve our citizens and our employees."

"I don't believe in renegotiating contracts," continued Anderson. "There's no end to it when you do. These are unsettled times, with unsettled markets. We have to be financially conservative."

The district calculated the one-time cost to restore the salary reduction seven months early at \$187,000.

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