

Sewer board member wins countywide growth agency seat

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen
Contra Costa Times

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Contra Costa sewer board member Mike McGill prevailed over six opponents and survived a runoff to win a seat on the countywide agency charged with stemming urban sprawl and overseeing public agency boundary shifts.

A packed meeting room signified high interest when the Contra Costa County Special Districts Association selected its representative to the Local Agency Formation Commission on Monday morning.

Voting delegates from 37 of the county's 44 special districts gathered in Pleasant Hill, an extraordinary showing for an appointment to a little-known board.

McGill, will fill the seat held by former Discovery Bay Community Services District member David Piepho.

Piepho did not seek re-election in November but tried to keep his LAFCO seat through an appointment to a cemetery board. His effort failed when the board of supervisors balked at selecting the spouse of a sitting supervisor, Mary Nejedly Piepho.

McGill, a 60-year-old licensed civil engineer who sits on the Central Contra Costa Sanitary District, was the top contender. He was the best-known of the seven candidates and has been lobbying for

weeks.

With a large field of contenders, McGill was unable to secure a majority in the first round and it came down to a runoff between the engineer and Tom Baldocchi Jr., a Knightsen-area farmer and firefighter who sits on the Veale Trace reclamation board.

Baldocchi emphasized his family's deep roots in the county and his

fire service experience, but could not overcome his opponent's broader resume and political connections. McGill has served on the sewer board since 2006, and specializes in municipal engineering and financing.

The final vote was 22-15 in McGill's favor. The winner needed 19 votes.

Every county has a LAFCO, which governs annexations, determines community planning areas and reviews delivery of public services including water, fire and police. Its board consists of representatives from the board of supervisors, the county's 19 city councils, 44 special districts and the public at large. The other candidates were Leonard Battaglia, West County Wastewater District; Sandra Bonato, Pleasant Hill Recreation and Park District; Danny Hamby, Byron Sanitary District; Richard Olsen, Moraga-Orinda Fire District; and Elmer "Al" Schaal, Mt. View Sanitary District.

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Pinole has few options for future fire service

By Karl Fischer
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 01/26/2011 11:34:55 AM PST

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Pinole cannot muster enough firefighters to safely extinguish a common house fire, without help from its neighbors.

The western Contra Costa County town can no longer afford the protection it has -- and merging with one of the cash-strapped departments nearby would only cost the city more.

That bleak news came out of a City Council workshop about the problem Tuesday night, during which a team of consultants described both the finances and working condition of Pinole Fire Department and its partners, a pair of fire departments that already share the chore of regional emergency response.

"No one of you can fight a serious incident by yourselves," said Stewart Gary, consultant and a former fire chief. "You can count widgets back and forth all day long, but when the bell goes off for a serious fire in Pinole, you all have to go."

Last summer, dire finances forced Pinole to "brown out" one of its two firehouses every third shift. All imaginable fat has been trimmed, the consultants said, all the way up to the fire chief. Chief Jim Parrott, working well past his formal retirement, must step down next month.

"I don't see the solution as simple," Councilwoman Debbie Long said. "We want two fully-staffed fire stations. We hear that loud and clear. How we get there is the question."

Pinole, along with the Rodeo-Hercules and Contra Costa fire districts, cheated fiscal ruin for years through a creative and nearly seamless pooling of

resources on the west end of the county.

Together they form a fire battalion, with enough staff and equipment to respond to a major emergency in a large swath of territory. The departments share administrative overhead, training together and each contributing a battalion chief on a rotating basis to supervise fire service in the region.

But the recession leaves all three departments facing service-changing cuts. Contra Costa Fire now mulls station closures, while Rodeo-Hercules is preparing to survey voter tolerance for a new tax.

The partnership cannot continue. And Pinole, which compensates its firefighters significantly less than the neighbors, would gain nothing from a more formal consolidation.

"I feel like I'm stuck on flypaper," Councilman Peter Murray said. "This is a very difficult situation."

Community and council asked questions and discussed the flawed public funding models that lead to fire-service meltdown, a phenomenon common throughout the nation. Few small-town departments remain in California, Gary said.

Some talked about the possibility of taxes. Others wondered about changing service. City Manager Belinda Espinosa, for example, said the city looked at replacing an engine company with a more lightly-

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staffed paramedic vehicle for medical calls.

But American Medical Response, the county ambulance provider, priced that option at about \$280,000, just for 12-hour coverage daily. Pinole cannot afford it, Espinosa said. And the region still needs at least the current number of firefighters on hand for major emergencies.

In the short term, the council heeded consultant recommendations about a few band-aid fixes to get Pinole Fire through the immediate future. Pinole will approach Rodeo-Hercules, for example, about sharing the cost of a single fire chief for both agencies.

In the long term, the council decided to ask for participation -- and shared cost -- from its neighboring departments to conduct an extensive community review of local fire protection standards and cost, with a goal of making a joint plan to field a financially sustainable fire service.

"I heartily endorse the one-chief model. I think you really need to look at that option," said Nick Ronchetto, a Rodeo-Hercules engineer and vice president of Local 1230 of the International Association of Firefighters.

"It's not a solution, I know it's not a solution, but it gives you a couple years to find a new revenue source or look for another answer to the problem."

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Reopened firehouse doesn't fix high costs

January 31, 2011

Residents in rural area near Clayton continue to face more expensive insurance rates

By Paul Thissen

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CLAYTON — When the East Contra Costa Fire District agreed to reopen the fire station serving the residents of Marsh Creek and Morgan Territory Roads, those residents declared victory.

Now they're wondering if they celebrated too soon.

Residents still face drastic insurance rate increases, if they can get coverage at all, because an insurance rating organization still considers them excessively high-risk — even though their coverage now is the same as it had been in previous years.

"We thought we won, but guess what — we lost," said Cheryl Morgan, who lives on Morgan Territory Road.

The problem is with the New Jersey-based Insurance Standards Office, which sets the risk ratings insurance companies use to set rates — or decline to offer coverage.

When the fire district voted last summer to shutter the fire station in rural Clayton for the winter, the residents of Marsh Creek and Morgan Territory Roads who could get coverage saw their insurance rates skyrocket.

Then, the problem was that the closest fire station in the district was 16 miles away, in Brentwood.

Responding to residents' pleas, the district's boards voted to reopen the Sunshine Station — a CalFire station in the summer that the district pays to keep open in the winter.

But the residents' fire rating has stayed at the highest possible level, even though the fire district's staffing is the same as it had been in past years.

"It looks like there's been some changes in their standards," said fire Chief Hugh Henderson. He said he is still working with the Insurance Standards Office, See **STATION**, Page 4

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Station

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which now requires four firefighters per station or another fire station within five miles, he said. The Sunshine Station has always been staffed with three firefighters, and the next closest station is 5.24 miles away, he said.

"I don't have final answers on any of this stuff," Henderson said. "We're still working on trying to get the exact answers."

Morgan said the Insurance Standards Office had given conflicting answers about whether the rules had changed before ceasing to answer residents' questions at all, saying all communication must go through the fire chief.

Insurance broker John Trammell, of All Star Insurance Agency, said he has a client in the area whose insurance cannot be renewed when it expires.

"It's going to affect not only my policyholders, but everybody," he said.

East Contra Costa Fire District puts off election on choosing directors

By Rowena Coetsee
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 01/31/2011 07:41:17 PM PST

Updated: 02/01/2011 01:40:34 PM PST

OAKLEY -- Directors of the East Contra Costa Fire District have postponed the approval of an election to determine how they are chosen, opting instead to ask voters for more money first.

At a special meeting Monday, the nine-member board agreed that it made more sense to find out whether district residents would support an assessment before asking them whether they want elected or appointed representatives.

The consensus was a departure from discussions last month in which directors were leaning toward holding an election in May to determine whether the board would go from being appointed by county supervisors and city councils to chosen directly by voters.

The plan was to propose a property-based benefit assessment later that same month in hopes of keeping the fire district solvent.

The district last year closed two of its eight stations in an attempt to offset the loss of property tax revenue, but the agency still is expected to run out of money before the end of the 2012-13 fiscal year if nothing changes.

At the district's Feb. 7 meeting, directors are scheduled to approve the hiring of an engineer to calculate how much more each property owner would be asked to pay with an assessment. The board then would call for an election, which is expected to happen about April.

On Monday, directors backed away from scheduling a mail-ballot election this spring on the selection process for directors, with some saying they could not

justify the estimated \$95,350 cost when the district is cash-poor.

The tab ultimately would be twice that amount, because if voters decided to move to elected representation, there would have to be a second election to choose those representatives.

"I have a really hard time spending this money," said Pat Anderson, who represents Oakley on the board. "I want to stay here (on the board) and find a way to get through this."

Director Erick Stonebarger argued that it is illogical to deal with how the board is elected before ensuring that the district has enough money to continue operating.

Kevin Romick, an Oakley councilman, agreed. "We need to focus on revenue," he said.

Not everyone initially agreed that an assessment should be the first order of business, however.

Bob Brockman, a Brentwood councilman, urged his colleagues to put the matter of how the board is chosen to voters, noting that the fire district board has talked about changing the status quo on multiple occasions but never taken the step.

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Chris Finetti, of Discovery Bay, said the board's current composition has prompted some constituents to raise the question of divided loyalties.

Doubtful that directors can champion the interests of the district as a whole when they also are expected to represent their respective communities, residents have told him that they won't support an assessment until the makeup of the board changes, Finetti said.

In the end, however, he and the others who wanted to proceed with an election on the board-selection process changed their minds.

The fire district still can put the matter to voters in August or November.

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