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Firehouse closure plan has Pittsburg officials fuming

By Rick Radin
Contra Costa Times
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PITTSBURG -- The potential closure of one of the city's three fire stations has officials concerned about longer response times to calls, increased danger from grass fires, and less-effective mutual aid.

The proposal is part of a strategy to cut the Contra Costa Fire District's budget that fire Chief Darryl Louder presented at this week's meeting of county supervisors.

The station targeted by the district is at 800 W. Leland Road, in the southwestern part of the city.

A Walnut Creek station at 1330 Civic Drive also would lose one of its two response teams under the proposal.

Pittsburg's two other stations are on Loveridge Road in the eastern area of the city and on East Sixth Street downtown. The Sixth Street station will be replaced soon by a station on Railroad Avenue that is under construction.

The supervisors, who serve as the fire district's governing board, tentatively approved the budget plan, except for the closure and downsizing.

The district's staff considered wildfire danger, proximity to oil refineries and other fire stations, number of fire calls, and other factors in choosing which stations to target, Louder said.

It will be easier to cover the southwestern portion of the city from the new Railroad Avenue station than from the Sixth Street station, he said.

Supervisor Federal Glover, whose district includes Pittsburg, was unhappy with the proposal, saying the Leland Road station is vital to

public safety in the area.

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He cited a recent major fire in Bay Point where firefighters from Leland Road backed up their colleagues from the Bay Point station.

"One of those things that you really need to be clear about in considering call volumes is mutual aid support," he said. "We need to look at how many times a station is called out to do backup, because that's important, also."

Pittsburg used more than \$6 million in redevelopment money to build the Loveridge Road station, which opened in December, and the new Railroad Avenue station, Assistant City Manager Joe Sbranti said.

Sbranti is upset that those sacrifices could be offset by the closure of another station within the city limits.

"We have positioned these stations so they can best cover the city geographically," he said. "Closing the Leland station would upset this balance."

A Pittsburg planning commissioner said the Leland Road station is vital because of the potential for grass fires in the city's southern hills.

"There's a much greater propensity to have an emergency situation because of the grass fire danger," said A.J. Fardela, who lives in the Oak Hills development south of Highway 4. "That Leland station is the closest thing we've got."

Even if all the cuts are carried out, the district will burn through half of its \$16 million reserves by the end of the 2010-11 fiscal year, and could consume the rest in 2011-12, Louder said.

The fire district has a \$95.2 million budget for 2010-11 and a \$8.7 million deficit, according to county Administrator David Twa.

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Without some significant change, they will be broke at the end of the 2011-12 budget year," Twa said.

The district is also studying the feasibility of putting a parcel tax on the ballot.

The district would save \$1.6 million by closing the Pittsburg station and downsizing the Walnut Creek station, Louder said. Glover said he wants to look closely at every alternative before voting to close any of the district's 30 stations.

"(Louder) mentioned two stations, and neither station should have been mentioned until the board had an opportunity to review all the data that's available," he said.

Supervisors asked the district to prepare a study session on the budget to be held later this month, Louder said.

He agreed that station closures should be a last resort.

"None of us are advocating for closing stations, and it's important that the public knows that," he said.

Contact Rick Radin 925-779-7166.

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