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## Vorderbrueggen: East County voters face hot fire service decisions

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen  
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In another testament to the challenges of local self-governance, voters in far East Contra Costa County, Brentwood and Oakley will likely face at the ballot box this year a question about who will run their fire district.

The nine-member East Contra Costa Fire District board, which consists of seven Oakley and Brentwood council members and two board of supervisors appointees, is expected to move to directly elected positions.

But what would voters get with an elected board except nine more elected officials?

Advocates make a persuasive and historically sound argument: East County residents pay a portion of their property taxes for fire service and they should select the people who spend their money.

The question of conflicted loyalties is also a worthwhile point. How will an Oakley or Brentwood council member vote when the good of the overall district runs counter to his or her city interests?

But skeptics fear the promise of a directly elected board is intended to lull voters into an illusion of local control and sweeten public attitude toward a new fee or tax.

Undeniably, the district is on the verge of bankruptcy, for several reasons, and must shave \$2 million from its \$9 million budget unless residents agree to some form of new fee or tax.

To understand the deep level of distrust here, one must review the tortured history behind fire service in East Contra Costa.

The seeds

of the district's financial plight are rooted in 1978 when voters approved Proposition 13, California's famous, or infamous, depending on whom you ask, taxpayer protection measure. It led to the adoption of baseline tax rates using population and other factors.

East County was sparsely populated those days and its fire tax rate was set at the low end of the scale, at 6 percent.

The communities established their own fire departments and staffed them, in part, with volunteers.

That worked fine until Brentwood, and eventually, Oakley and other unincorporated areas such as Discovery Bay, grew into their suburban plans and residents sought service levels equal to their more urbanized neighbors. But the 1978 tax rate failed to reflect the new landscape.

County and local governments in East County have struggled for years over how to respond to the contrary trajectories of demand vs. money.

Nearly a decade ago, the board of supervisors led a successful but contentious move to merge three East County fire districts into the existing single organization under county control. Even then, the consolidation documents referenced the desire to

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share governance between the cities and the county and the creation of a directly elected board.

Yet, it took the parties another seven years to sign a joint powers authority and delegate the running of the district to the current appointed board.

Meanwhile, the Great Recession ate into the fire district's property tax proceeds, drained its reserves and further exacerbated its downward financial spiral.

Some critics point the finger at the county, arguing that the board of supervisors knew the district was structurally insolvent but failed for years to pursue new sources of money such as the imposition of fire benefit assessment districts on all new development in the region.

Others cite the cities of Brentwood and Oakley, whose residents contribute the largest share of property tax dollars, saying their leaders blow hot and cold, and undermine public confidence in the fire district with their persistent talk of bailing out, merging with another district or forming their own.

After all, why would anyone vote for a new elected fire board when one of the JPA members could leave?

On the other hand, a government divorce is hard.

For one, the county has no incentive to go it alone. Brentwood and Oakley property taxes already subsidize fire service in unincorporated Bethel Island, Byron, Discovery Bay and Knightsen, according to one analysis.

A split would require approval from the Local Agency Formation Commission, a county-based agency charged with overseeing the orderly and efficient delivery of public services. It would

mandate a thorough study of the impacts.

More significant, the neighboring Contra Costa Fire District is worse off than East County, and cannot afford to take on territory where the tax rate is less than half of its own. Plus, it has higher operating expenses due to salaries and service levels.

Either way, the financial clock is ticking.

Faced with either making massive service cuts or convincing wary voters of the need to dig deeper into wallets, the question of who is in charge seems less integral than that of what will be left to govern.

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minivan."

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