

Fire officials decry funding cut

By Noel Stack | Mother Lode News | March 24, 2009 13:10

El Dorado County fire officials have declared an emergency.

A proposal by El Dorado County Chief Administrative Officer Gayle Erbe-Hamlin to eliminate the county's Aid to Fire contribution has departments on high alert as some small, rural districts depend on the funds to keep their stations staffed.

This fiscal year the county gave \$1.39 million to small fire districts. Erbe-Hamlin's proposal presented at the Feb. 23 El Dorado County Board of Supervisors meeting would cut the funding in 2009-10. A trust fund amount of \$962,570 would go to the districts next fiscal year and then the county contribution would drop to zero.

The Board of Supervisors will hold a public meeting on the Aid to Fire funding at 9 a.m. on Monday, March 30, in the board chambers, 330 Fair Lane, Placerville.

El Dorado Hills Fire Chief Brian Veerkamp said every fire district would take a hit if the supervisors supported the CAO's proposal. When smaller fire departments lose money they lose staff "and volunteers are harder to come by because of the training requirements and the economy," Veerkamp said.

This puts a burden on larger fire districts as they see their areas of responsibility grow and response times increase, Veerkamp continued.

"Response times will go from 2 minutes to 15 minutes or longer," states a letter released by fire chiefs and the county Emergency Services Authority. "This could have serious 'life or death' consequences. Fire districts will be forced to refuse any statewide mutual aid requests, virtually making mutual-aid/automatic aid to neighboring fire agencies a thing of the past."

Assistant Chief Administrative Office Ron Grassi said he's met with the fire chiefs and understands their concerns; however, with a \$4 million budget deficit projected in 2009-10, Grassi said cutting Aid to Fire out of the General Fund budget "is something (the supervisors) are going to have to seriously consider."

In January 2009 the county made the following Aid to Fire payments:

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| • Rescue - \$202,351 | • Latrobe - \$168,978 | • Fallen Leaf Lake CSD - \$60,454 |
| • Pioneer - \$279,047 | • Georgetown - \$36,240 | • Meeks Bay - \$312,945 |
| • Mosquito - \$ 5,047 | • Garden Valley - \$205,285 | |

The fire chiefs' letter states that Aid to Fire money "has been used to purchase and maintain fire apparatus and personal protective equipment, to provide training, to support fire prevention and public education programs, to institute full-time paramedic (ALS)-engine companies, to start apprentice firefighter programs, to provide seasonal firefighter positions, to meet 'matching' funds on several large grants, and to allow districts to participate in statewide and local mutual aid requests."

District 1 Supervisor John Knight, who served on the El Dorado Hills fire board prior to his election, said he's not in favor of cutting Aid to Fire given to fire districts that legitimately need it and use the money well. **However, he noted, one district took the county's money and put it in reserves.**

"That tells me that they're well-managed and (financially) OK," Knight said.

Even if the board decides to continue its Aid to Fire contributions Knight said he'd like to see a program overhaul that requires district to meet specific criteria before they get a check. The supervisor also said fire districts should reach out to their communities for financial support and/or consider consolidation to better serve residents.