

Supes to negotiate funding with chiefs



By Pat Snelling | Mother Lode News | March 31, 2009 12:31



FIRE VEHICLES filled the parking lot at the

County Government Center Monday. Democrat photo by Pat Dollins
Supervisor Ray Nutting fought hard to bring closure to the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors' struggle with a budget shortfall and still meet the county's fire departments funding contract.

The Board of Supervisors called another special meeting on Monday, March 30, to discuss funding the "Supplemental Funds," which the county now calls "Aid to Fire," and Nutting, one of the originators of the contract, called it "parity."

Nutting wanted the board to continue the current contract with the fire districts receiving 13 percent of the property taxes that are collected in their district, and in a second motion to have the board start over with a subcommittee made up of fire chiefs and two of the board members, Knight and Briggs.

The board voted Nutting's motion down, 3-2 with Nutting only getting Supervisor Norma Santiago's vote.

The board then voted only to go back and renegotiate, 3-2 with Supervisors Jack Sweeney, John Knight and Ron Briggs voting yes.

"This is just going back over this again," said Nutting.

The fire chiefs had already voluntarily agreed to hold their supplemental funding at the same level for the last two years even though property values went up and the 13 percent would have been more.

"Times were tough, and the chiefs didn't ask for the full amount. I think we're there," said Nutting.

"I want the chiefs to bring the money in tighter," said Knight.

The board has brought the Supplemental Funding up in several meetings since August. On Feb. 23, at a special budget meeting the board was surprised when the county fire chiefs were along the back of the room even though the agenda saying Supplemental Funds had been posted on the Website just 14 hours before.

The board agreed that they needed more time and information to look at the funding issue, so they agreed to reschedule and meet on March 30.

The Board Chambers was again filled with firefighters, chiefs and local residents. People were lined up on both sides of the room and across the back and several people watched on the monitor outside the chamber.

"There is so much energy spent on this issue, and we have many other things to work on," said Nutting. "If we don't resolve this, they will all be back again every month."

Assistant Chief Administrative Officer Ronald Grassi's reported that the county's revenues are flat and the county is close to \$5 million short.

"The \$1.3 million contracted to the rural fire districts is equivalent to 17 full-time (county government) positions," Grassi said.

The fire chiefs stated if they don't get supplemental funds that all eight districts will lose some personnel and not meet mandatory training to keep volunteers, all which affect emergency response time.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney said that he didn't think it was the county's place to fund the fire departments.

Supervisor Ron Briggs said that he believes that consolidation is the answer because it will save money.

Several speakers questioned how consolidation would save money because it would only eliminate the fire chief and the clerk. If the number of firefighters were cut, emergency response time would be longer.

Rescue Fire Protection District Chief Thomas Keating said that in August 2000, the Board of Supervisors made a commitment when they entered into an agreement that said the county fire departments would provide the best medical protection for the people in the districts.

"These words also came with a commitment of funding. That funding wasn't a gift or welfare to fire districts, as it has been called. It's a return of tax dollar to the people who are paying for it," said Keating.

"Since that time, the population has grown 11 percent, and we have a 43 percent increase in calls. A lot of these fires never reach the newspapers. They are kept small because of our response time. The county has had over 200,000 visitors in the Crystal Basin."

Keating also said that unfunded mandates at the federal level set funding and staffing levels. "If I don't train my staff, I'm held criminally and civilly liable. SB 1207 requires that volunteers have to have the same training as paid personnel, over 400 hours a year. Volunteer firefighter have dropped 20 percent," Keating said.

"Every time we report to the board, we have provided reports to the CAO where the funding has gone," Keating said.

The board's agenda for this meeting included total financial records of all eight fire departments receiving supplemental funds, with monthly pay schedules and equipment purchases.

"It's a life safety issue," said Mary Cornelison, former chairman of Volcanoville's fire services. "During the Ralston Fire, Georgetown and Cal Fire sat in our front yards. I heard one of the board members said that roads were more important. There is no comparison. It's life safety first."

Supervisor Santiago said, "I had a fire engine sit in my front yard during the Angora Fire. I know how important fire departments are to this county. They are job one."