



Fire Protection in East County

ISSUE 1

P L A N N I N G F O R T O M O R R O W

Meet the Transition Team for East County Fire Protection

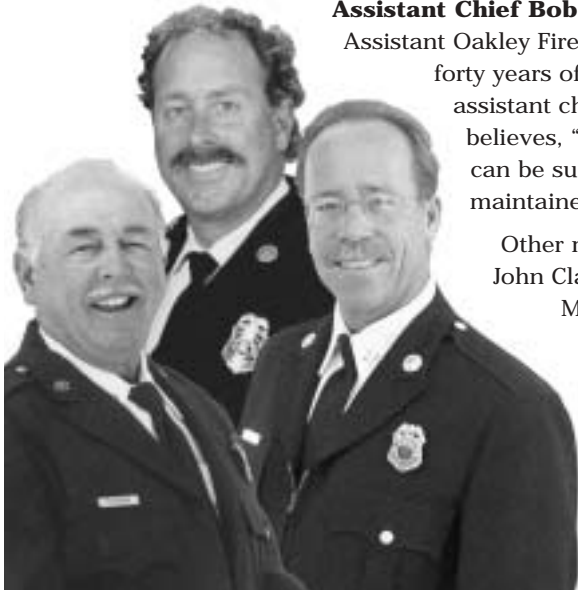
Chief Mark McCullah—In order to start the process toward unification the Board of Supervisors directed the County Administrator to assemble a transition team to manage the operations and provide technical, professional, and financial support. The transition team is led by the new Acting Interim Chief Mark McCullah, whose career spans two decades of progressively responsible experience with the State Division of Forestry, the former Riverview Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District as a Battalion Chief. Chief McCullah has served as the Chief of the East Diablo District for the past eighteen months, where he distinguished himself a leader in the community and gained the respect of the firefighters throughout the district. Chief McCullah's guiding principles are clear.

"Throughout my career, I have spent many years building relationships, training and working with some of the finest firefighters in East County, while protecting the citizens within our communities. My objective is to maximize our resources and effectively combine all East County firefighters to continue our common goal and commitment to excellence in public service."

Chief Dave Wahl—Coming from Bethel Island is Fire Chief Dave Wahl who began his career as a volunteer, then worked for the City of Pinole Fire Department, and returned to Bethel Island first as Assistant Fire Chef, and most recently as Fire Chief. Chief Wahl said, "The growth in far East County has had a tremendous impact on our ability to provide fire protection and emergency service. It is only common sense that the three far East County districts work together to serve those changing needs."

Assistant Chief Bob Pastor—Rounding out the transition team is Assistant Oakley Fire Chief Bob Pastor who is a veteran with over forty years of service, initially as a volunteer firefighter, then assistant chief, and later acting chief. Assistant Chief Pastor believes, "The merger of the three East County districts can be successful if the paid-on-call personnel are maintained as an integral part of the new fire district."

Other members of the team include Assistant Chief John Clary of East Diablo and Rich Seithel, Management Analyst, who provide organizational and fiscal analysis.



**The Transition Team—
from left to right:
Robert Pastor, Assistant Fire
Chief, Oakley; Mark McCullah,
Acting Interim Fire Chief;
David Wahl, Fire Chief,
Bethel Island.**

Fire District mergers provide better service

(Chief Dave Wahl Describes the History)

Fire district unification has occurred throughout the United States, but had its true beginnings in Contra Costa County, California. Over the years more than a dozen mergers have produced better fire protection service throughout Contra Costa County, according to Chief Dave Wahl, who has conducted research on the subject.

The first consolidation in the County occurred with the merger of the Central Fire District and the Mt. Diablo Fire District in 1964. Over the next thirty years additional annexations of the City of Martinez Fire Department and the Lafayette and Briones, Bay Point and Mt. View Fire Districts took place, and finally the dissolution of the Riverview, and West County and Pinole Fire Districts which then merged with the Contra Costa County District. Today the district serves over 600,000 people.

The San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District exists today because of the merger of the former Danville and

continued on page 4

Editorial

BRENTWOOD NEWS

A KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPER

GEORGE E. RIGGS, Publisher
ED DIOKNO, East County Editor

April 19, 2002

As Romantic as it might seem to see the citizen/firefighter volunteers throw on their firefighting gear and rush to a fire, this approach is no longer adequate. That day is over.

The final version of the long-awaited and much maligned Davis Report has finally been issued and to no one's surprise it recommends the consolidation of the three East County fire districts.

The Bethel Island, Oakley-Knightsen and the East Diablo fire districts have traditionally operated as separate entities, each with its

The guidelines provided by the Davis Report will make for a more efficient firefighting force

own administration, fire chief and trustees. It makes economic and administrative sense to combine this portion of the fire districts.

Supervisors Donna Gerber

and Federal Glover announced in a press conference Thursday they want to have two full-time firefighters staffing the Oakley-Knightsen and Bethel Island fire stations 24/7.

The supervisors also will allow Brentwood to raise additional funds of its own to staff their stations with a third firefighter, the recommended number of firefighters per truck.

The report also calls for the retention of the paid, on-call firefighters used primarily in the Bethel Island and the Oakley-Knightsen districts. The fate of these firefighters was a major stumbling block but keeping the cadre of selfless residents is an added safety margin for fighting fires in the newly formed spread-out single district. This will be a way of gaining the third firefighter without raising additional fees.

Many details have to be worked out yet but we are pleased to hear that the current fire chiefs support consolidation.

As this part of the county transforms from an agrarian landscape to bedroom communities, it was inevitable the changes would have an impact on the fire districts. The guidelines provided by the Davis Report will make for a more efficient firefighting force and increase fire protection for the residents of Bethel Island, Knightsen, Oakley, Brentwood, Byron and Discovery Bay.

Emergency Service Needs Grow Daily in East County

We Need to Plan for Growth

- The current population and the 68% projected growth in population by the year 2020 require both immediate and long-range changes to protect the safety of East County citizens and business.
- For decades East County residents have been served by three separate rural dependent districts—each with its own fire chief and administrative structure; separate training program; separate service model; and separate fire advisory commission. This worked well when East County was primarily farmland.
- Population growth in recent years in Oakley, Brentwood, Discovery Bay and throughout the region has brought these communities close together and changed its character. East County is no longer a strictly rural area.
- Unifying the three districts will aid further planning. After research and study, an independent consultant found that the three rural districts are no longer sufficient to the needs of the future. A coordinated effort by the cities and the county's unincorporated communities (Bethel Island, Byron, Discovery Bay and Knightsen) to collaborate is needed to improve service levels.
- The Board of Supervisors initiated the process of unifying the three districts into a single district through the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) on May 14, 2002. The reason for this action is to provide and plan for adequate service, while preserving local financial and service assets.



Speaking of Myths

Myth: The County can solve fire protection problems in far East County by simply reallocating more property tax dollars from its General Fund.

Reality: Allocation of property tax revenue is governed by State law, not County ordinance. In accordance with State law the locally elected Auditor-Controller in each California county allocates property taxes among cities, districts and the county in proportion to their individual share of property tax collected prior to voter approved Proposition 13 in 1978.

Myth: The County has “diverted” property tax revenue belonging to one or more of the three fire districts in East County to other districts or to the County itself.

Reality: The County does not and never has diverted local property tax from these districts or any other district in the County. Again, the locally elected **Auditor-Controller Ken Corcoran** allocates taxes, and the accuracy of this work is independently confirmed and audited for compliance with Proposition 13 by the State Controller every three years.

Myth: Unifying the districts will destroy the paid-on-call service model.

Reality: The on-call (or volunteer) staff have a proud history of dedication and service. Therefore, a combination full-time and paid-on-call service model is envisioned after unifying the districts. The Board of Supervisors on April 23, 2002, in a regular meeting held in Oakley, declared its intention to develop an implementation plan for minimum

baseline service consisting of two-person engine crews, 24 hours per day, seven days per week (24/7) at suburban fire stations, while retaining the use of paid-on-call firefighters. Led by the new Acting Interim Chief Mark McCullah, a transition team is actively preparing implementation for this combination of service. *Higher levels of staffing (including three or four person models) will be decided in the future by the new unified fire district.*

Myth: The Board of Supervisors will solely control the newly unified district.

Reality: Ultimate governance for the new unified district has yet to be determined and will be subject to considerable public discussion and input. Three options are being considered:

- (a) A **dependent** district governed by the Board of Supervisors;
- (b) An **independent** district governed by a locally elected board with no connection to the County; or
- (c) A **dependent** district governed by a five-member joint powers authority (JPA) comprised of the Supervisors from Districts III and V, along with an elected member of the City of Oakley City Council, and an elected member of the City of Brentwood City Council and a member at-large from the unincorporated area selected by the other members.



Unification Will Save Lives

According to **Art Lathrop, County Emergency Medical Services Director**, the merger of the three districts will have two positive improvements in emergency response. “The

suburban station staffing model (two person engine crews, 24 hours per day, seven days per week) will reduce first responder response times in Oakley by at least two minutes. Each minute reduced in response time significantly increases the likelihood of saving the life of a heart attack victim.” Lathrop also said, “The merger will assure more rapid paramedic response in Oakley due to the assignment of a new paramedic unit to cover not only Bethel Island but Oakley as well.”



Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

Question: Why is the Board of Supervisors taking this action?

Answer: The Board of Supervisors believes it is their responsibility and duty to put this controversial issue on a path that will improve service and benefit the public. The fragmentation, mistrust, misinformation and conflicting opinions and separate philosophies must end. A new vision with one administration makes both economic and administrative sense.

Question: Will emergency services improve even more in the future?

Answer: Yes. Action by the Board of Supervisors to unify the districts will not only boost firefighter staffing to two full-time engine crews, 24 hours per day, seven days per week at suburban stations in the new district, but set the stage to increase permanent staffing in the future. Already the City Council of Brentwood has expressed interest in supplemental funding to add a third firefighter to the district stations in the city limits. Other communities will have an opportunity, at their discretion, for higher levels of service with voter-approved tax measures in the future.

Question: What happens to paid-on-call firefighters?

Answer: Paid-on-call (POC) firefighters will continue to provide important service by staffing the Knightsen Station and being available to supplement the permanent full-time firefighters at suburban stations throughout far East County.

Question: Can't the County simply reallocate property tax to provide more funding?

Answer: No. Allocation of property taxes is governed by State law—not County ordinance. Current funding levels in all areas of the County are inadequate due to the limitations imposed by Proposition 13 and implementing legislation that govern the allocation of property taxes within local tax rate areas.

Question: Will this plan raise taxes?

Answer: No. It does, however, contemplate the ability of local communities within the unified district to supplement funding or assess themselves to permit higher levels of service or coverage if they desire.

Question: How does the taxpayer benefit?

Answer: Full-time firefighters (supplemented by POC) will be deployed at all fire stations in the East County region except the rural area of Knightsen. Equally important is that paramedic service will be enhanced in the region by eliminating the boundaries that currently restrict a paramedic (funded by Measure H) to Bethel Island.



Fire District Mergers continued from cover

and Tassajara Districts, and serves nearly 200,000 people in all of the incorporated cities and unincorporated area of Contra Costa south of Walnut Creek. In the Lamorinda area, the Orinda and Moraga Districts were unified into one district for that region of the County.

Second only to Contra Costa's innovativeness and progressiveness is the Los Angeles County Fire District formed by the unification of ten independent fire districts in 1949. Today it serves 52 of the 88 cities in Los Angeles County.

Chief Wahl generally describes mergers as follows: "Fire district unification addresses the increasing demand for services and accountability from the public. Efficiencies and economies of scale such as one administration and adopting uniform standards have reduced the costs of doing business in previously fragmented multiple agencies. Unification of districts creates strategic alliances, maximizes scarce resources and provides better service to the public."

Why is a change necessary?

Residents will get more protection for their tax dollar



Fire crews from Oakley, Knightsen and East Diablo join together to fight a residential blaze in Oakley.

- A professional consultant hired upon recommendation of the community found: that... “there are too many fire chiefs and service configurations resulting in a duplication of effort and expenditure...” and that... “training for firefighters is not sufficient, uniform or integrated; and finally,... “resources among the three districts are not effectively shared.”
- Following years of debate and study, the Board of Supervisors has now acted to rectify these deficiencies and to ensure that East County residents and businesses receive the adequate fire protection and emergency medical services.
- On April 23, 2002 management of the three districts was placed under one chief, thereby maximizing resources and reducing administrative costs. A transition team composed of the acting interim chief, with support from the County Administrator, Human Resources Department and others has begun developing: unified training programs; a master plan for facilities and equipment; a multi-year fiscal plan; a minimum baseline service model of two-person engine crews; and a combination staffing model of full-time and paid-on-call firefighters.

Who Will Be In Charge? How Will the New District be Governed?

The Board of Supervisors is considering three alternative structures for the ultimate governance of the new district subject to public discussion and input:

- A dependent district governed solely by the County Board of Supervisors
- An independent district governed by a locally elected board with no connection to the County; or
- A dependent district governed by a five-member joint powers authority, with elected members of the Oakley City Council and Brentwood City Council, the elected County Supervisors of Districts III and V and an at-large member.

The ultimate governance structure of the new fire district will be determined after consolidation approval by Local Agency Formation Commission (expected in September 2002). During the intervening months, local community participation is being sought through a transitional advisory commission (TAC) that will advise the Board of Supervisors and fire chief. The five-member TAC will serve as the liaison between the Board and the community and also provide feedback to the fire chief.



THE BENEFITS OF UNIFICATION A Few Comparisons

<u>Service or Activity</u>	<u>Before</u>	<u>After</u>
Administration	3	1
Fire Chiefs	3	1
Training Programs	3	1
Stations staffed 24 hours	6	8
Full-time Firefighters	36	48
Paid-on-Call Firefighters	74	80
Total Firefighters	110	128
Master Planning	Fragmented	Unified
Operating Expenses ⁽¹⁾	\$6,423,112 ⁽²⁾	\$5,540,196
Cost Savings	-0-	\$882,916

(1) Based on the proposed eight suburban stations and one paid-on-call station.

(2) “Before” operating expenses costings include projections presented to the Oakley City Council by the Oakley Fire Protection District on February 25, 2002.

Looking for the latest consolidation update?

Go to: www.co.contra-costa.ca.us





Planning for tomorrow

During the unification process, the Board of Supervisors created a Transition Advisory Commission (TAC) of five appointed citizens. These advisory commissioners will be selected based upon their interest in fire and emergency response, commitment to improving the response and willingness to take on the difficult task of advising the Board of Supervisors on future needs and financing for the new district. Appointments are expected in late June 2002 and their work will start in July.

The Acting Interim Chief Mark McCullah will assist the TAC and provide staff support for their work. Meetings will be open to the public and held on a rotating basis throughout the new district.

For more information about the Unification Process and New Fire District call Chief Mark McCullah at (925) 634-3400.

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