

Chiefs discuss new era for local fire protection

The Valley Springs News, Friday April 20, 2012

By Nick Baptista

The transition coming to west Calaveras fire protection service was explained Wednesday to the Valley Springs Area Business Association.

Retiring Foothill Fire District Chief Mike Siligo and Jenny Lind Chief Kim Olson outlined the changes taking place within their fire protection districts beginning May 1. Chief Siligo is retiring April 30 and administrative services for the two districts will be combined under what is being called Calaveras Consolidated Fire Authority with Olson as the chief and Jenny Lind Fire Capt. Jason Robitaille being promoted as the deputy chief.

The two chiefs have been working together for more than a year since Olson took command of the Jenny Lind department to integrate their operations and the two boards of directors have been taking steps to consolidate the departments into one.'

The coordination will improve overall fire, medical and emergency service to residents of both districts, Olson said. His goal is to continue improving response times on all emergency calls.

Jenny Lind's average response times have been reduced from nine minutes to just under four minutes and that will be his target for the combined operation because whenever the fire department can reach a medical or fire call within the first four minutes, the outcome is generally positive in terms of saving a life or saving a structure.

The chiefs also addressed the monetary and tax aspects of a possible consolidation. The Jenny Lind district, established more than a half-century ago, receives a greater portion in property tax monies compared to Foothill, which was formed in 2000. On a per house basis, it comes out to \$54 in Jenny Lind and \$6 in Foothill.

However, the money is all part of the 1 percent portion local government services receive. So, while Foothill residents receive less for fire protection service, a greater portion of their tax money goes to the schools or the library, so it all evens out, Olson said, and if combining the districts improves efficiency and fire service in each area, the public benefits from the move.

The two districts at one time had five chiefs and now they will have two, he said. Those extra dollars are being put back into hiring firefighters.

Beginning Nov. 1, Jenny Lind started 24-hour coverage with at least one hired firefighter and when you take into account volunteers, there generally is a second person at the station 90 percent of the time, Olson said. He'd like to extend the same coverage to Foothill and foresees the combined district becoming a firefighting teaching magnet and offering a stipend to interns to help with round-the-clock coverage.

The two chiefs also talked about the necessity for a station eventually in Wallace and improving the Valley Springs station to accommodate new equipment and offer sleeping quarters for 24-hour coverage.

The districts also have to look at becoming the area's ambulance service sometime down the road, Olson added.

Siligo talked about a new building ordinance in the works that will authorize fire officials to conduct building inspections.

The purpose of the ordinance is to allow fire officials to familiarize themselves with the buildings for firefighting purposes and mitigate any potential problems they see in terms of public safety, he added.

Fire officials will also have a record of contacts for those businesses in case of an emergency.

Another item being discussed by the districts is establishing charges for emergency responses involving out-of-county residents, he added, since they do not pay local taxes to cover those services. It is a common practice elsewhere and generally is paid through the person's insurance coverage.