

Fire districts take major step toward merger

The Valley Springs News, Wednesday, July 4, 2012

By Nick Baptista

Foothill and Jenny Lind fire protection districts on Sunday merged their operations into what is now called the Calaveras Consolidated Fire Protection Joint Powers Authority.

So what does that mean for the residents of the two districts? One immediate step was residents in the old Foothill district, which included the communities of Burson, Camanche, Campo Seco, La Contenta, Valley Springs and Wallace, had round-the-clock coverage as of Sunday.

The Valley Springs station now has two firefighters on staff during the day and at night they will bunk at the Burson fire station, said Consolidated Fire Chief Kim Olson.

Previously, Foothill provided a stipend for two firefighters from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day, the chief said.

To implement the 24-hour/7-days-a-week coverage, the volunteer firefighters agreed to forego their year-end points/bonus system for responding to calls and putting that money back into the budget to go toward stipends for the full-time coverage, the chief explained.

"We're getting more hours for less money," Olson said, "and it should substantially reduce response times."

A similar plan was instituted last November at Jenny Lind and response times were cut in half.

Cost of 24-hour/7-days-a-week coverage for Burson and Valley Springs is \$150 a day, which equals a \$65 stipend for a firefighter and \$85 for a fire captain.

The operational merger is leading to "more coverage, faster response times, faster back-up times and better ways to serve the communities," Olson said.

The merger process has been in the works for nearly a year and a half and the first substantial change took place May 1 when Foothill Chief Michael Siligo retired and Foothill contracted with Jenny Lind for administrative services.

The Joint Powers Authority is the second step in the process with each district retaining its boards of directors but all of them meeting once a month as a separate board. The first meeting of the Calaveras Consolidated board took place Monday evening.

The final step is formal consolidation, which goes before the Local Agency Formation Commission and the Board of Supervisors for approval.

Hazel Cain raised one objection to the merger Monday evening. She objected to the choice of the name Calaveras Consolidated.

"It's just a horrible name," she said.

Cain said the new district's name should include Foothill and Jenny Lind to acknowledge their origins.

Chief Olson explained the joint authority covers nine communities and it would be difficult to come up with a name to reflect all of them.

In addition, Calaveras Consolidated gives the joint authority to add other fire districts with Copperopolis and Mokelumne Hill mentioned as possible future partners.

The Jenny Lind name will continue, Olson said, since it will remain as one of the new entity's fire stations.

"I have nothing against joining the two together, I just wish we could hold on to the names or have a better name," Cain added.

The district's name is such a small issue, said Jenny Lind board member Dennis Peterson, with the bigger issue being the vision of the new entity providing outstanding service to the public at a reasonable cost to taxpayers.

"I'm so proud of you all," Alice Raine said to the boards, staff, and firefighters. "Thank you so much for getting together."

Mike Cammisa, who had been a volunteer with the departments, said he never thought he'd see the two merge during his lifetime.

"This is unreal to me," he said.

The two districts-as-one will operate on a fiscal year budget of \$178,000 with Jenny Lind contributing \$94,500 and Foothill \$84,400. It was explained Jenny Lind's initial share will be higher to pay for landscaping at the Jenny Lind Station and higher utility costs.

Bruce Brown was selected by the joint board to serve as president, while David Sant was chosen as the vice president, Bob Hazelton the finance director and Tim Runion the secretary.

The joint powers board will meet at 7 p.m. the fourth Wednesday of the month in the Jenny Lind station.