

CalCo fire mitigation fee moves forward at board level

By Nick Baptista / The Valley Springs News / Wednesday, February 24, 2016

A request by the Calaveras Consolidated Fire Protection District to hike mitigation fees on new development passed its first hurdle Tuesday before county supervisors.

The board voted 4-1 on the first reading of a proposed ordinance that will enable CalCo and all other fire districts within the county, if they follow suit, to increase fees on new construction. The proposed ordinance has to come back to the board for final approval and the district then has to prepare a study demonstrating the need for the fee increase.

District 4 Supervisor Debbie Ponte was the lone member of the board to vote against introduction of the proposed ordinance. She wanted more input from the fire officials in her district, which includes Angels Camp and Copperopolis, before weighing in on the suggested changes.

CalCo Fire Chief Jason Robitaille told the board it has been nearly two decades since a fee increase has been levied on new construction.

At this time the fire district receives a flat fee of \$300 when a new home is built and another \$900 fee is expected to disappear once the water tenders are paid off.

CalCo is looking at charging by the square foot on new construction and a figure of \$1.01 per square foot was discussed, but awaits further study.

The money would be used to buy fire engines, firefighting equipment and fire stations.

“We want to make sure we don’t become outpaced with new development,” Robitaille said, and not have the firefighting resources available to cope with the greater demand on services.

New development would include all projects requiring a building permit, but there are exceptions in instances such as existing building being damaged or destroyed. In addition, the fees would not be charged for a remodeling if the square footage did not change.

Board Chairman Cliff Edson said he understood the proposed ordinance would bring the fee structure up to what it should be after being neglected for so long.

Robitaille used Wallace Lake Estates as an example of how the proposed fee would be helpful to residents. The subdivision is expected to grow substantially in the near future, but does not have a nearby fire station.

The money from the new construction mitigation fee could be used to build and equip a new station, dramatically reducing response times and simultaneously reducing homeowner insurance rates.

District resident and retired CalFire Battalion Chief Cameron Todd said a 2014 mailer prepared for CalCo showed the public would not support higher fire fees.

CalCo Board Member Kim Olsen disagreed. He said the survey dealt with CalCo pursuing a benefit assessment district, which was unpopular with large landowners, but most in the public support the district.

He added CalCo is working on a ballot issue for an upcoming election that would look at funding to expand services.

Todd said the district should just work with the funds it has in its existing budget.

MyValleySprings.com members Colleen Platt and Mark Jones asked for more time to study the proposal and inform the public.

District 3 Supervisor Michael Oliveira encouraged CalCo to educate the public on the proposal to avoid the backlash similar to when the state Legislature passed the CalFire fee.