

CalCo seeks vote to expand services

By Nick Baptista, The Valley Springs News, Friday June 3, 2016

The Calaveras Consolidated Fire Protection District Board of Directors has decided to place a tax assessment measure on the November ballot.

The proposal calls for an assessment of \$96 a year on the average residential parcel, according to CalCo Chief Jason Robitaille, and would fund the establishment of full-time paramedic services within the district.

CalCo's is the busiest fire protection district in Calaveras county, handling approximately 1,250 service calls last year, and nearly 80 percent of those were for medical assistance, the chief said.

Although the district has paramedics on staff, it does not have the authority or equipment to provide advance life support services, he added.

"It's our biggest frustration, to be on scene with paramedics, but only able to provide basic intervention until an ambulance arrives."

In many cases, the ambulance, operated by a private entity, arrives after CalCo firefighters have been at the scene for several minutes, the chief said, and those minutes can be critical to the patient's outcome.

The tax would give the district the funding to purchase and install advance life support equipment on its engines and have a paramedic on each engine around the clock.

With the necessary equipment, the paramedics would be able to provide more than cardiopulmonary resuscitation when they arrive at the scene. They could also offer advance life support services such as intubating a patient, starting IVs, providing cardiac medication, or narcotics for pain management.

"We would be one of only three departments in the county to offer advance life support services," the chief said. The other two are Ebbetts Pass and Copperopolis, both of which have tax assessments to provide the expanded services.

"I feel comfortable approaching the community at this time," the chief said. "We've done everything we can to be fiscally responsible. We consolidated (Jenny Lind and Foothill) and pulled our resources together to be more efficient. We now staff two stations 24/7 with a minimum of two firefighters at each station; sold two fire stations and 10 pieces of apparatus."

Expanding services and better serving the community has been a goal, he added.

“Each year we’ve been progressing toward this model and the community deserves an increased level of service.”

He also believes the district will have difficulties maintaining its current level of service without additional funding.

“We’ve done an exceptional job in terms of training and response times with the money we’ve got,” he said, but “it’s not a sustainable plan.”

The district has averaged about \$550,000 a year in property tax revenue, but operating expenses have been \$700,000 a year. Much of the additional funding has come from providing fire crews during major state blazes.

The district has three full-time positions with limited benefits and two long-term engineer/supervisors. The rest of the staff is composed of volunteers who receive a small stipend while on duty.

The district has been a farm team for larger departments, constantly losing trained firefighters, with three just the past month joining career departments.

In the past year, the department had 100 percent turnover at the captain and supervisor levels.

The department has earned a reputation as a good training ground and received grant funding to provide plenty of training, but that funding expires this year and it’s unknown whether the department will be able to attract the number of new recruits it has in the past.

The tax assessment would provide a total of 10 new full-time positions in the department, and Robitaille said he is confident it would provide the incentive for many of the firefighters he has now to remain with the department.

The chief invited the public to contact him or visit if they have questions. He’s also willing to talk to local groups and organization to spread the word about improving services. He can be reached at 786-2227.

The board resolution calling for a November vote will now go to the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors for final consideration.

CalCo was formed on July 1, 2013 through a Joint Powers Agreement between Jenny Lind and Foothill Fire Protection Districts. Cal-Co Fire covers roughly a 163 square mile area in the western portion of Calaveras County serving the communities of Valley Springs, Burson, Wallace, Campo Seco, Milton, Rancho Calaveras, La Contenta and Jenny Lind. Cal-Co Fire protects various commercial operations, single-family residences, three high traffic recreational lakes and an expansive wildland interface area.