

CalCo looking for a way to finance upgrades

By Nick Baptista/ The Valley Springs News/ Friday, Feb. 14, 2014

Results of a survey to determine whether west Calaveras residents are interested in paying to upgrade fire protection and emergency medical services are scheduled to be released to the public at a Feb. 24 meeting of the Calaveras Consolidated Fire Protection District Board of Directors.

The meeting begins at 7 p.m. in the CalCo Company 3 fire station located at 6501 Jenny Lind Road.

Mail surveys recently were sent to property owners and registered voters within the CalCo district.

The survey looked at four areas of concern- retaining firefighters, replacing aging firefighting equipment, offering advance life support services and building a station near Wallace.

CalCo Fire Chief Kim Olson and Deputy Chief Jason Robitaille explained the rationale for the survey at Thursday's meeting of the Rotary Club of West Calaveras.

The district has made great strides since the 2012 consolidation of the Jenny Lind and Foothill fire protection districts, Olson said, but it is reaching a plateau.

The district now has a system in place with two fully staffed engines, but property tax dollars to operate the district have gone down 40 percent the past few years, he said.

As the economy recovers and fire districts elsewhere have been able to expand their budgets, firefighters trained by the predominately volunteer CalCo district are being lured away, Olson said.

The department typically has a paid captain on duty, who does not receive benefits, and three firefighters who receive \$60-day stipends for their 24-hour shifts, he explained.

The compensation is not competitive and "local guys who want to stay here" are departing.

The district's recent success as a magnet for training is contributing to the loss of personnel.

"Our firefighters are very marketable," Robitaille said.

The department's equipment is another problem with all but one frontline engine at least 25 years old, Olson reported. Two frontline engines are down, he said, and repairs are costing the department "a lot of money" and it costs \$450,000 to buy a new engine.

Although the district covers a third of the county's population, only one private ambulance is stationed in the area, he said, and at times it is called elsewhere. District personnel are trained as Emergency Medical Service providers, and are dispatched on medical calls, but the district wants to see if there is enough public interest in CalCo expanding into providing paramedic and advance life support services.

Without a nearby fire station in Wallace, area residents could see substantial increases in their fire insurance or be denied insurance.

The Wallace area insurance is scheduled to be evaluated in March.

Olson said a property owner has offered to build a station at Southworth Road and State Route 12. He would lease it to the district with an option to purchase.

The survey also looks at what amount the public is willing to pay for enhanced protection and will try to determine the likelihood of passage.

Olson stressed CalCo does not receive any funding from the state fire tax imposed several years ago and it appears most of the \$115 to \$150 a year goes directly into the state General Fund and doesn't make its way to Calfire.

The survey will also determine whether the district should pursue seeking a benefit assessment or parcel tax. A benefit assessment needs approval by 50 percent of property owners plus one, while a parcel tax requires a two-third vote plus one of registered voters.