

Fire district backs off placing tax measure on ballot

By Nick Baptista/ The Valley Springs News/ February 26, 2014

The Calaveras Consolidated Fire Protection District Board of Directors will not ask voters for a new tax to upgrade fire protection and emergency medical services.

Talk of a new tax struck a cord as approximately 60 members of the public attended Monday night's meeting of the board. The crowd was large enough to move the session from Jenny Lind station's classroom/meeting hall to the bays where the fire engines are kept.

"The message was loud and clear from the people in the community," CalCo Fire Chief Kim Olson said Tuesday morning. "We have a lot of support, but we heard a lot of frustration toward government in general."

Causing the frustration, Olson added, was a plethora of new taxes and fees that people said "were being forced down their throats" – ranging from health care to the state-imposed fire fee on rural property owners, to recent water and sewer rate hikes – and "we got the brunt of it."

CalCo recently sent mail surveys to property owners and registered voters within the district to gauge the level of support for a tax proposal or assessment charge.

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

Olson said the survey indicated only 30 to 40 percent of public support for a tax measure.

Faced with continued reductions in revenue from property taxes and not enough support for a tax measure, "We'll do whatever we have to do to keep service available," Olson said.

Work is beginning on the district's 2014-15 budget, due in July, and Olson has been told by the county to plan for a 5 percent reduction in property tax revenue. With that reduction, the district is likely to receive approximately \$422,000 in property tax revenue.

The district has an operating budget of \$611,000 in fiscal year 2012-13. Most of the gap between tax revenue and operating expenses has been made up by providing "strike teams" to help the state during the wildfire season.

However, strike team income varies year-to-year and is not guaranteed, Olson said.

In addition, CalCo needs adequate manpower to deploy strike teams and if retaining firefighters in the district becomes an issue that source of revenue would be jeopardized.

Without adequate compensation to retain firefighters, the district has little or no control over the manpower issue, he said.

CalCo has been successful in recruiting by serving as a training ground for firefighting students, but you still need to provide good supervision, Olson said.

As far as equipment, CalCo will "fix and run it until it doesn't run anymore," the chief said, and the district is likely to liquidate some more equipment such as engines earmarked for a Wallace station since it is no longer in the picture.