

LODE FIRE TAX COULD GO TO VOTERS

By **Dana M. Nichols**

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Record Staff Writer

VALLEY SPRINGS - The chief of the Calaveras Consolidated Fire District, which serves the greater Valley Springs area, says his fire engines are too old and his firefighters too young.

The volunteer firefighters get lured away by the pay in other agencies once they are well-trained, Fire Chief Kim Olson said. Most of the engines, meanwhile, are a quarter-century or more old, and there are no funds earmarked to replace them.

That all could change, however, if district voters are willing to tax themselves to solve these problems, he said.

Calaveras Consolidated recently mailed out a survey to many voters in the district asking them how likely they would be to support taxing themselves to improve fire service.

The district's board of directors Monday night will review the results of that survey and consider whether to put some kind of assessment or parcel tax on the ballot.

Olson said in a telephone interview last week that the biggest hurdle so far is that many residents incorrectly believe that a \$115-per-house state fire fee they pay is somehow supporting the local fire district.

"We're hitting a lot of resistance with the Cal Fire fee," Olson said.

Although the up-to-\$150-per-home tax adopted by the state government in 2011 for homes in so-called "state responsibility areas" is called a "fire prevention fee," it goes to the state's general fund. None of it goes to fund local districts like Calaveras Consolidated.

Instead, Calaveras Consolidated is funded by local property taxes and revenue, currently about \$450,000 a year, which is down 40 percent since the real estate collapse that began in 2007, Olson said.

The department has only three full-time staffers: two chiefs and a secretary. Volunteer firefighters get a stipend of \$65 per 24-hour shift.

As a result, Olson said most of his recruits are recent graduates of college fire academies seeking the experience they need to gain full certification as firefighters. Once they get certified, they leave for better jobs.

"We just lost one to Honolulu, Hawaii," Olson said.

The aging fire engines, in contrast, stick around, because Olson can't afford to replace them.

And the district has other needs. Area residents sometimes must wait far too long for an ambulance. That could improve if the fire district offered an ambulance service, Olson said.

And a coming insurance industry review of the district will likely result in a downgrade for the protection rating of residences in the Wallace area, because homes there are too far from a fire station.

Olson said those homeowners may face significant hikes in insurance rates unless the district can find a way to place a station in or near Wallace.

A number of other Calaveras County fire districts have succeeded in winning voter approval for funding. West Point Fire Protection District voters in 2011 voted 83 percent in favor of Measure A, a tax of \$78.50 per year per parcel. Central Calaveras Fire and Rescue Protection District voters in 2007 voted 77 percent in favor of a \$65 per year parcel tax. Ebbetts Pass Fire District voters approved parcel taxes in 1998 and 2004.

"We are one of the only districts in Calaveras County that does not have an assessment in place," Olson said.

On the other hand, Murphys voters in 2007 failed to give a special tax the two-thirds approval it needed to pass. And the county has well-organized and vocal groups that oppose tax increases.

Still, Olson said he is hopeful that voters will support increased funding once they are informed about the district's situation.

"It is a turning point for the district. This will solidify the fire district well into the future," he said.

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Follow him at recordnet.com/calaverasblog and on Twitter @DanaReports.