

CalCo Fire dealing with staffing shortage

By Nick Baptista / The Valley Springs News / August 2, 2023

Staffing shortages and budget concerns have forced Calaveras Consolidated Fire Protection District to close its downtown Valley Springs station one day a week.

The staff, which just a few years ago had a pool of more than three dozen firefighters, is down to a dozen firefighters, according to CalCo Fire Chief Rich Dickinson.

On Saturday, he made the move to inform the public of the shortage by closing the Valley Springs station and placing a banner across the bay doors saying “Closed due to staffing.”

While some have called the chief’s action “a scare tactic,” Dickinson said it is a reality and people need to know when the station is closed so in case of an emergency they don’t go to it looking for help.

The district receives a fixed amount from property taxes and the revenue from that source has not kept pace with rising costs for items such as fuel, insurance and electricity, the chief said.

In addition, he has lost 40 firefighters the past seven years who have opted to work for departments that offer much higher salaries, benefits and retirement.

Another source of staffing, academy recruits, are also migrating to departments that offer better incentives.

The chief said the one-day a week closure will continue because the department has to “live within its budget” and maintain an adequate reserve.

“This is not a manufactured scare, it’s a reality,” said CalCo Board Chairman Keith Hafley. “We’re not crying wolf. The wolf is at the door.”

A countywide vote last year to supplement the nine fire districts with an additional 1-cent charge on the sales tax failed.

The additional revenue would have allowed CalCo to keep three fire stations open – re-opening the one in Burson – with three full-time firefighters at each station, the chief said.

“Many people said after the vote they didn’t know our situation,” Dickinson said. “Now they know.”

A petition is circulating to put a similar proposal back on the ballot.

The chief has had calls for people wishing to volunteer. The days of unpaid volunteers in this area are over, he added. There are just too many calls for volunteers to drop what they are doing and respond to the emergency. There is just too much training involved and without such training the department would face liability issues and potential lawsuits.