

Board ponders how to spend Butte Fire settlement funds

By Nick Baptista

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An 11th hour memorandum presented by Calaveras County Supervisor Jack Garamendi will serve as a “skeleton” model on how to disperse more than \$20 million recently received from Pacific Gas & Electric Co. to settle claims stemming from the 2015 Butte Fire.

Given the memo at Tuesday’s meeting, the rest of the supervisors agreed Board Chairman Garamendi’s proposal could serve as the basis to begin discussions next month on finalizing distribution of the Butte Fire settlement funds.

“The communities most impacted by the Butte Fire (Garamendi’s District 2) deserve our focus and resources for recovery and our whole county will benefit from an improved community infrastructure,” Garamendi said in his memo.

District 2 covers the communities of Mokelumne Hill, Paloma, West Point, Wilseyville, Glencoe/Rail Road Flat, Sheep Ranch, Mountain Ranch, and Calaveritas.

More than \$14 million in Garamendi’s plan would be earmarked for road repairs in the Butte Fire zone.

Another \$2 million would be set aside to 10 fire districts in the county for the purchase of equipment and capital assets, while \$1 million would be available to the Calaveras County Fairgrounds, which serves as the county’s primary evacuation center, for infrastructure repair and improvements.

He also had \$1.1 million designated to District 2 fire districts and community halls for repairs and emergency preparedness.

Road repair work is scheduled to come back to the board next week for discussion.

Two members of the board balked at accepting Garamendi’s whole proposal.

District 1 Supervisor Gary Tofanelli said he wanted the opportunity to “digest” the proposal and add his own suggestions.

“This to me was a total surprise,” District 4 Supervisor Dennis Mills said about Garamendi’s proposal, which was not a part of the board’s agenda packet.

County staff from all corners of the county worked on the fire and Mills said he wanted the opportunity to have a broader discussion about dispersing the money.

“This is a concept,” District 3 Supervisor Merita Callaway said of Garamendi’s memo. “It could be plus or minus.”

Garamendi apologized for the lateness of his proposal, which he characterized as “a skeleton” the rest of the board “can poke holes at.”

The bottom line is if items are added, some will have to be removed, he added.

At the end of what had been a daylong meeting, the board voted 5-0 to bring dispersal of the settlement funds back as an action item.