

CalCo Fire dips into reserves for summer help

The Valley Springs News / June 29, 2022

Directors of the Calaveras Consolidated Fire Protection District this month decided to dip into financial reserves and hire six seasonal firefighters rather than risk going without enough personnel during the looming summer fire season.

“We didn’t have anybody that wanted to continue to work for \$125 a day,” CalCo Fire Chief Rich Dickenson said of the stipends the district pays to interim firefighters for 24-hour shifts.

CalCo is the county’s largest fire district and serves the communities of Burson, Jenny Lind, Rancho Calaveras, Valley Springs and Wallace.

Calaveras County’s local fire agencies have been losing their low-paid volunteers and interns in record numbers recently as CaFire goes on a hiring spree and California cities seek to replenish the depleted ranks of their fire departments. Even the federal government, long known for its low pay to firefighters, is gearing up to pay a living wage to firefighters with funds from an infrastructure bill President Biden recently signed.

“CalFire took a lot of our people,” Dickenson said.

Until recently, CalCo always kept two paid firefighters on duty 24/7. One of those paid firefighters was stationed at the Jenny Lind station and one at the station in downtown Valley Springs. The district was able to keep two or three firefighters on both engines, however, by using volunteers and interns who were paid the \$125-a-day stipend.

Now, however, CalCo finds it is losing those interns and volunteers faster than it can replace them. The district had been able in recent years to fortunately earn money by renting engines and crews to CalFire strike teams fighting fires around the state. That windfall means that, temporarily, the district can afford to hire six more seasonal firefighters, said Kim Olsen, a member of the district’s Board of Directors.

Olsen said the district will spend almost \$150,000 through Dec. 2 to double the number of firefighters on duty 24/7 to a total of four – two each at the district stations in Jenny Lind and Valley Springs. District directors voted unanimously on June 13 to approve the temporary funding.

However, in the long run that pace of spending will not be sustainable unless the district gets new revenue, the district might have to close one station next year, Dickinson said.

Calaveras County voters in November will vote on Measure A, a citizen initiative that would address the problem. Measure A, a 1-percent sales tax, would pay to staff fire engines at local agencies across the county. CalCo would receive approximately \$900,000 a year through passage of Measure A and those extra funds to the district would be enough to keep the engines staffed at the existing stations and Also to reopen the station in Burson that is now vacant.

“CalCo isn’t the only fire district losing its trainees,” said Dana Nichols, chairman of the citizen committee behind Measure A. “For a long time, our young people have been stepping up to volunteer and provide these lifesaving services. But now with the rising cost of living and job opportunities elsewhere, they simply can’t afford to stay here. Measure A is a way to guarantee adequate fire staffing countywide, and to ensure that at least some of our young people can afford to live and work in the community they love.”

To learn more about Measure A, go online at Calaveraslfp.org or call Nichols at 209-768-9072.