



NEWS



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San Bernardino County supervisors ask for alternatives to parcel tax

Martin Estacio, Victorville Daily Press

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A San Bernardino County firefighter at a burning home in 2014. [Daily Press file photo]

Residents in some unincorporated county areas could see new tax measures on next year's ballot that, if passed, would help fund fire and emergency services.

Saying they wanted voters to weigh in on the issue, the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday directed staff to research alternatives to a parcel tax levied last October.

The tax was imposed following the Board's 3-2 vote to expand a fire protection zone, known as FP-5, under the **San Bernardino County Fire** Protection District.

FP-5, which had already included several cities, was broadened to take in all of the county's unincorporated areas, with a \$157.26 tax on each parcel.

Fire officials said the revenue was needed to address a \$29 million deficit and continue funding the same level of services.

Supervisors Robert Lovingood and Janice Rutherford, who voted against the expansion, have said they believe it should've been decided by a majority of voters in the first place.

Rutherford called a protest process initiated before last year's approval "flawed" on Tuesday.

"It's difficult and complicated, and requires extra effort for people," she said. "That's why an affirmative ballot measure is the way to go."

FP-5's expansion came after mailers were sent out to affected landowners before the Board's meeting to address it.

If 25% of persons who owned at least 25% of the assessed value of land had sent back written protests, the matter would've gone to an election.

When the Board approved the expansion in October, county staff said they received protests only good for about 3% of landowners. Residents at the meeting criticized the process and the tax being levied on all parcels, which includes vacant land.

Tuesday's decision means that County staff and fire officials must present different options to the Board by Nov. 19 for generating about \$26.7 million in revenue, which represents the amount the fire district was expected to collect from the expansion from 2021 to 2022. The options chosen could end up as tax measures on the November 2020 ballot and apply mostly to those people with land not within a city.

Besides the annexed unincorporated areas the Board focused on, the fire district also collects revenue in the zone from FP-5 cities, such as San Bernardino, as well as the community of Helendale. Altogether, FP-5's total revenue along with the expansion would've equaled about \$41.5 million.

The Board's direction on Tuesday came after a presentation from the County's CEO and fire chief, who warned of drastic cuts to emergency services without revenue generated by the tax.

SBCFPD Interim Fire Chief Don Trapp said nine to 17 fire stations could be shut down.

Response times would also rise dramatically, with one region possibly experiencing an almost hour-long increase, he said. Some of the numbers were based on the overall revenue of the fire protection zone being withdrawn.

Trapp said one of the reasons for the revenue stemmed from a "substantial increase in the use of 911 and fire services as a 'responder of first choice.'"

"Whether for homelessness, substance abuse, mental health, routine access to healthcare, many people are calling 911 today for basic services," he said. More than one-third of calls the department receives turn out to be non life-threatening, according to the chief.

At least 11 attendees, most members of San Bernardino Professional Firefighters Local 935, spoke in support of the parcel tax.

"Let's be clear, a vote to eliminate FP-5 is a vote against resident safety," said 935 member, Kenneth White.

While the parcel tax remains intact, the members' apprehension in light of a possible future without it was likely exacerbated by the Board's decision in June to not approve a 3% increase, months after the tax was enacted. The fire district was allowed to ask for the maximum increase every year, pending the Board's approval.

CEO Gary McBride said on Tuesday that the 2020 measures could include a different parcel tax, a general purpose tax or a special purpose tax.

<https://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20190925/san-bernardino-county-supervisors-ask-for-alternatives-to-parcel-tax>

Voters likely to see new fire tax on ballots as FP-5 expires

Jené Estrada, Hi-Desert Star

Posted: September 25, 2019

SAN BERNARDINO — The new fire tax charged to most county property owners was back on the table for the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors as they met Tuesday morning and discussed different ways to fund the fire district after the FP-5 expansion area sunsets next year.

After fire protection zone 5 was expanded to most county areas last year, **county fire** leaders went in front of the board of supervisors on June 11 to ask for a 3 percent increase to the \$157 per-parcel fee.

Instead, the board voted not only to deny the increase but also to set no FP-5 fee next year with the hopes of being able to replace the fire district's funding mechanisms with a tax measure in the upcoming general election.

Gary McBride, the county chief executive officer, presented options to the supervisors with help from Deputy Fire Chief Don Trapp.

The FP-5 tax brings in \$41.5 million and it was expected to increase by \$1.2 million next year with the 3 percent increase.

McBride said the board could try to get voters to pass a special tax — either a parcel tax, a fire tax or a community facilities district, or a transaction tax — either a general purpose tax or a special purpose tax.

During public comments, several community members spoke about the need to shore up funding for fire services.

While many spoke in favor of keeping FP-5, others called the process for the expansion of FP-5 unlawful. While they disagreed on the funding mechanism, everyone agreed that funding the fire district was vital.

Third District Supervisor Dawn Rowe, who represents the Morongo Basin, agreed the expansion of FP-5 was done in a way that was unfair.

“It was a very distasteful process and that’s why we’re here today,” she said.

Property owners could protest the tax by downloading a form and mailing it.

Second District Supervisor Janice Rutherford agreed with Rowe and said her goal ultimately is to bring the tax to a public vote.

“The protest process is not sufficient for creating a new tax,” said Rutherford. “The protest process isn’t simple; it’s difficult and complicated and requires extra effort for people. That’s why affirmative action is the way to go.”

One question is where the money will come from if voters don’t pass a new tax.

In the past, funding for fire services has come out of the general fund. Since the money needed to make up the deficit from the expansion area would be about \$26.9 million, the board expressed concern about who would lose out on that money.

Another question was if they were only rolling back on the recent expansion of FP-5. Before the zone was expanded last year, a few areas were already part of FP-5.

Most supervisors agreed that the recent expansion was the main issue and, before the expansion, most of the agencies in FP-5 had requested to be included, like Twentynine Palms.

Twentynine Palms’ only funding for fire comes from the FP-5 tax, while cities like Yucca Valley, which was part of the recent expansion, also pays for through property taxes.

Ultimately, the board decided to direct staff to bring back more information, with the goal of working out a plan before the next general election. The \$157 charge for FP-5 will still be in place until January 2021.

Every property owner in the Morongo Basin will be charged that money except for those in Morongo Valley.

http://www.hidesertstar.com/news/article_6cd0f11c-dff3-11e9-8b9e-cbd6aa6416bf.html

AFTER FIGHTING FOR FUNDING INCREASES, AGUILAR AND TORRES ANNOUNCE NEARLY \$2 MILLION FOR RIALTO AND FONTANA FIRE DEPARTMENTS

Staff Writer/Press Release, U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar Media Center

Posted: September 25, 2019

Reps. Pete Aguilar and Norma Torres announced \$1,590,996 in federal grant funding for the City of Rialto and \$301,363.63 in federal funding for the Fontana Fire Protection District. The funding was awarded by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) through the Staffing for Adequate Fire & Emergency Response (SAFER) and Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) programs. The SAFER grant, awarded to the City of Rialto, will fund the hires of up to seven new firefighters and enable the Rialto Fire Department to expand their ability to provide life-saving assistance throughout the city.

The AFG award will allow the Fontana Fire Protection District to replace and upgrade outdated radio equipment with Bluetooth-enabled breathing apparatuses in order to improve firefighter communication and safety. Both Aguilar and Torres serve on the House Appropriations Committee, which determines funding levels for federal agencies and programs, and have successfully fought for funding increases to programs such as SAFER and AFG that provide resources to first responders.

“From providing medical assistance to battling wildfires, fire departments across San Bernardino County work tirelessly to keep our community safe. I’ll continue fighting for increased funding for programs like SAFER and AFG to give Inland Empire first responders access to the critical resources they need,” said Rep. Aguilar.

“As a former 911 dispatcher and someone who lost her house to a fire, I know what it feels like to see a fire truck coming to your rescue. The firefighters of the Rialto Fire Department and the Fontana Fire Protection District selflessly put themselves in harm’s way to respond to emergencies and protect residents. That’s why I worked with Congressman Aguilar on the Appropriations Committee to secure this critical funding. SAFER and AFG grants ensure that our local fire departments in the Inland Empire are appropriately staffed and prepared to deploy capabilities effectively and efficiently,” said Rep. Torres.

“We’re excited to know that we were successful in securing the FEMA-SAFER grant during this cycle. I commend and applaud the efforts of our Fire Department, for continuing to pursue innovative approaches to fire services and public safety for the Rialto community, as well as regional assistance where needed,” said Rialto Mayor Deborah Robertson.

“Fontana Fire District is thankful for the funding received from this grant which will allow us to replace our current obsolete portable 800mhz radios with the latest technology that will enhance our communications while on emergency incidents,” said **San Bernardino County Fire** Department Assistant Chief Jeff Birchfield. “One particular enhancement includes Bluetooth technology, which will allow for the radios to

connect to our facemasks on our self-contained breathing apparatus, providing better communication to other units and incident commanders on the fireground.”

<https://aguilar.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/after-fighting-funding-increases-aguilar-and-torres-announce-nearly-2>

COUNTY SUPERVISORS CONSIDER FP-5 FIRE FEE ALTERNATIVES

Staff Writer, Z107.7 FM News

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Back in June, **County Fire** went to the board of supervisors in San Bernardino looking for a three percent increase to the contentious \$157 per parcel fire fee levied against property owners in approximately 19,000 square miles of mostly unincorporated county land known as Fire Protection District 5, or FP5. The request came even before property owners had seen the new fee on the tax bills and just months after it was established in an unorthodox maneuver called a negative protest vote. The process and the requested increase did not sit right with supervisors, including our own newly appointed Third District Supervisor Dawn Rowe, a resident of Yucca Valley. Reporter Mike Lipsitz picks up the story from here...

Rowe joined the other supervisors in calling for county administrators to come up with funding options to cover a \$13 million annual shortfall in providing fire and emergency services. And she led the effort to successfully deny the requested 3 percent increase. Cutting funding from the fire district's budget completely could lead to fire station closures, staffing cuts and higher response times, fire officials have said. And while acknowledging that the public must pay for such services, Rowe said yesterday that she couldn't, in good conscience, support the increase before the public has a chance to vote on the matter. So county administrators yesterday outlined a few alternative funding methods, including property and sales taxes, that voters could see on the ballot sometime before January 2021. Until such a vote, the \$157 special tax isn't going to go away, but it isn't going to go up either.

<http://z1077fm.com/county-supervisors-consider-fp-5-fire-fee-alternatives/>