



NEWS



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Small fire breaks out on roof of Fontana church

BEATRIZ E. VALENZUELA, San Bernardino Sun

Posted: October 17, 2018, 12:32 am

Firefighters quickly extinguished flames that were visible on the roof of a Fontana church late Monday night, **San Bernardino County Fire** officials said.

Firefighters received a 911 call just before 11:30 p.m. of flames shooting out through the roof of the Friendship Community Church located at 14800 Base Line in Fontana, Eric Sherwin, spokesman for the fire department said.

It took firefighters about 20 minutes to knock down the blaze, he said.

The cause of the fire was under investigation. The total damage done by the fire was not immediately available.

<https://www.sbsun.com/2018/10/17/small-fire-breaks-out-on-roof-of-fontana-church/>

Supervisors pass fire tax

Staff Writer, Daily Press

Posted: October 17, 2018

SAN BERNARDINO — County Supervisors significantly broadened the number of landowners who will be affected by an annual parcel tax to fund fire services late Tuesday, signaling a major victory for County Fire, which is faced with a nearly \$30 million funding gap, but also alienating scores of constituents in the process.

The expansion of **San Bernardino County Fire's** FP-5 Service Zone, which is accompanied by a \$157.26 yearly parcel tax, will include unincorporated communities and other incorporated cities serviced by the district that don't already pay, with some exemptions. The tax can rise up to 3 percent annually.

It is expected to generate \$27 million yearly in new revenue for County Fire, almost all but shoring up a \$29 million shortfall. This current fiscal year budget of \$276.6 million was backfilled — excluding contracts and ambulance services — by \$12 million in reserves and \$17 million from the county's General Fund to bring it to neutral.

But the expansion, which is without a sunset, was widely panned during a marathon eight-hour-plus meeting by several dozen members of the public. In addition to decrying the tax's imbalanced effect — the levy will hit vacant properties and high-density ones the same — they questioned the protest mechanism's constitutionality.

In June, by a majority vote, County Supervisors authorized initiating a protest vote whereby those against the expansion could submit a form. It was a model that followed the Local Agency Formation Commission and, although not a legally required process, the standards were incredibly high.

If 25 percent of affected landowners who own at least 25 percent of the assessed value of land submitted protests, then the matter would be deferred to an election. If the figures rose to 50 percent, the proposal would have had to been withdrawn.

More than 368,000 notices were sent out. Once the protests were tabulated Tuesday evening, it was revealed the county had received 11,472 verified protests — good for 3.18 percent of affected landowners. They represent 1.97 percent of the assessed property value.

Those numbers fell well short of meeting the required threshold, a barometer that some described as 'absurd' and 'criminal.' Protesters implored Supervisors to either squelch the expansion altogether or at least send the decision to voters, calling the protest process truncated and discriminatory and suggesting that as a tax it should be passed by two-thirds of the electorate.

Instead, the only vote that would occur would come from Supervisors, who narrowly passed the expansion 3-2, with Supervisors Robert Lovingood and Janice Rutherford, who supported submitting the proposal to the ballot, choosing to reject it. The makeup was identical to the 3-2 vote in June to initiate proceedings to expand the zone.

Michelle Blakemore, the county's legal counsel, said that the expansion was legal and, in fact, 'the board has gone above and beyond what is required' by taking the step to enable a protest process at all.

For County Fire, the expansion and new revenue will stave off — at least immediately — difficult decisions and allow the department, which was lauded by both sides Tuesday for its service, to maintain current levels.

'We'd have to cut back,' Fire Chief Mark Hartwig said, when asked to describe the likely outcome of a non-expansion. 'As I explained, it would be painful.'

Hartwig and others described funding shortages as a reality that had been stewing for further than a decade, as the fire chief rattled off ways in which the department has sought to reverse the financial hemorrhaging including pulling resources from neighboring agencies and removing safety personnel from ambulances in favor of general employees.

Josie Gonzales, the 5th District Supervisor, appeared on the surface to struggle with her decision throughout the hearing. And although she ultimately supported the expansion, it was preceded with a warning.

'It is imperative that San Bernardino County Fire Department,' she said, 'identifies their identity.'

It was an allusion to the idea that the department could no longer sustain acting as both a full-fledged fire and medical services agency as Gonzales cast Tuesday's decision as one that would determine the quality of life for residents for years to come.

She also insisted that she would not support augmenting County Fire operations from the county's general fund in the future, even as Hartwig noted that he planned to request those monies during the next budget cycle.

'If we are to continue in the manner that we have,' she said, 'we will part ways.'

<http://victorvilledailynews.com/newsmemory.com/publink.php?shareid=24a274c0e>

AFTER 6-HOUR MEETING, COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT EXPANSION AND FEES APPROVED

Staff Writer, Z107.7 FM
Posted: October 17, 2018

Following a marathon six-hour public hearing in San Bernardino yesterday the proposal to expand the **county fire** protection district, FP-5, to more than 19,000 square miles passed yesterday.

County supervisors Lovingood and Rutherford opposed the expansion and the associated \$157 per parcel fee.

Supervisors Gonzales, Hagman, and our own James Ramos voted in support of the measure.

More than 60 citizens spoke against the measure and the convoluted process for property owners to oppose it. No one from the public spoke in favor.

The expansion and fee were conceived as a bailout measure and permanent solution to county fire's \$29 million budget shortfall.

The plan was widely opposed because it disproportionately burdens low-income property owners and because it was presented as a fee rather than a tax.

By calling it a fee, the county was able to skirt the voter approval requirements of prop 218 and instead, devise a convoluted process to oppose the plan.

Judging from the vote, the scheme worked as fewer than four percent of property owners (representing 1.9 percent of assessed value) successfully negotiated the protest requirements to have their votes counted.

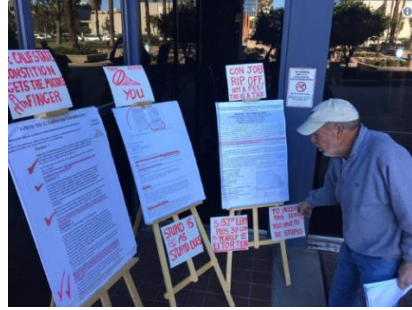
Unless the courts intervene, property owners can expect to see the fee on next year's property tax bills.

<http://z1077fm.com/after-6-hour-meeting-county-fire-district-expansion-and-fees-approved/>

Long public hearing ends with San Bernardino County expanding fire coverage, and taxes

Sandra Emerson, Daily Bulletin

Posted: October 16, 2018, 7:41 pm



The line to get into the chambers is wrapping around the lobby. Bud Long, 84 of Mentone, has a display outside the county gov. building entrance. He says the tax is unconstitutional.[@ReporterSandraE]

A long and sometimes contentious public hearing ended Tuesday with San Bernardino County Supervisors voting to expand fire protection services in unincorporated areas, raising taxes and hackles for some residents.

The board's 3-2 approval to enlarge the fire coverage zone, known as FP-5, and institute a \$157 annual parcel tax, came after too few property owners submitted written protests to trigger an election on the issue or an outright defeat.

By the end of the public hearing, the county received 11,472 verified protest forms, making up 3.18 percent of the more than 368,000 property owners and 1.97 percent of the assessed land value.

In order to put the proposal before voters, 25 percent of property owners who control at least 25 percent of the assessed land value in the proposed coverage zone would have had to submit protests. To defeat it, more than 50 percent would have needed write in their opposition.

Supervisors Curt Hagman, Josie Gonzales and James Ramos voted in favor of the expansion, which is supported by **county fire** officials. Board Chairman Robert Lovingood and Supervisor Janice Rutherford voted against it.

The board made its decision after hearing from more than 60 residents from across the county, including some who spoke via satellite from Joshua Tree and the High Desert. Upland and San Antonio Heights residents also addressed the board.

Some residents voiced concerns about having to pay the tax on vacant property and on multiple properties. Others were worried about the financial impact on lower income residents and senior citizens.

Many who spoke, however, were critical of the written protest process.

"You have selected the most unfair way to assess this tax," said Celeste Doyle, of Joshua Tree. "A flat tax per parcel, regardless of value or proximity to services, is just bogus. You have also selected the most difficult way for the property owners to resist this imposed tax."

In June, supervisors voted 3-2 to initiate the process to expand the zone based on a recommendation by County Fire Chief Mark Hartwig to address a \$29 million budget shortfall.

Revenue from property taxes, contracts and fire protection service zones have not been enough to cover the district's rising costs and the agency increasingly has relied more on county general funds and its own reserves.

The tax is expected to generate an additional \$26.9 million in revenue for the fire district starting in 2019. The funds will address the deficit, but also allow county fire to pay for capital improvements and add to its reserves.

"As of today, I will no longer support San Bernardino County fire receiving financial assistance from the general fund," Gonzales said. "It is critical that San Bernardino County fire be self sufficient like everyone else and live within your budget."

While state law allows the expansion of the fire zone through the public hearing protest, the board agreed to also hold a written protest process to better gauge community opposition.

In September, county fire mailed notices to more than 368,000 property owners countywide.

Fire and county officials have held community meetings, public presentations and created a website on the proposal, among other outreach efforts. Fire officials even provided protest forms to residents who could not download it from the website, Hartwig said.

"Outreach efforts were exhaustive," Hartwig told the board. "We really undertook an effort as involved as we could to make sure that all the communities knew what FP-5 was and how it would affect them."

Several unincorporated communities in the county, including Helendale and San Antonio Heights, and cities of San Bernardino, Needles, Twentynine Palms and Upland, are already covered by the fire district.

Some communities are already paying a fee, while others are not. Regardless, all property owners within the zone will have to pay the \$157 annual tax.

For example, Red Mountain property owners will see a drop from their current bill, which is \$192.47. But in Havasu Landing, where property owners currently pay \$139.59 a year, and in El Mirage, where they pay \$9, the new rate will be higher.

Property owners in Mentone, however, were not paying an additional fee. One of those property owners is Bud Long, who on Tuesday set up a display outside the entrance of the government center with large print outs of Article 13 D of the California constitution. That section calls for a two-thirds vote of the people to pass a special tax.

Long, 84, said his property tax bill was \$3,000 a year when he built his home in 1982. Now it's \$8,000.

"I don't have a mortgage," Long said. "The only thing I do is pay taxes on my house. It's getting to where I can't even afford the taxes. I don't own my home. I'm renting it from the county is what it amounts to."

Property owners from Upland and San Antonio Heights, who went through their own controversial annexation into county fire a year ago, were included in the protest process for the current expansion proposal.

Members of the San Antonio Heights Association are suing the county, county fire and the Local Agency Formation Commission over Upland's annexation into county fire one year ago.

LAFCO voted to include the unincorporated community in the annexation, which also came with a \$150-plus parcel tax. A similar written protest process was taken for that expansion.

The latest expansion is already being debated in court. Last week, property owners, along with The Red Brennan Group and the Lucerne Valley Economic Development Association, filed a lawsuit and injunction aimed at stopping Tuesday's hearing. The injunction, however, was denied by a San Bernardino County Superior Court judge.

<https://www.dailybulletin.com/2018/10/16/san-bernardino-county-fire-special-tax-zone-expansion-approved-by-board-of-supervisors/>

Weigh the options, share your thoughts

Staff Writer, Big Bear Grizzly

Posted: October 17, 2018

Big Bear Fire is asking for input and answering questions as staff prepares for the future. The town hall meetings are your opportunity to listen and learn and share your concerns and suggestions.

Big Bear as a community has grown. The days of one or two stoplights, two lane roads and the town rolling up the sidewalks at dark are long gone. OK, so maybe the sidewalks roll up occasionally, but while this is still a small, rural town on a mountaintop, it has grown. And it will continue to grow.

And with growth comes the need for infrastructure and services. That includes such things as streets and maintenance, water and sewer, a hospital, grocery stores and pharmacies, clothing stores and even cell phone and cable companies. It also means the need for emergency services and law enforcement.

In Big Bear law enforcement is provided by the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department and the California Highway Patrol. Emergency services are mainly provided by Big Bear Fire, **San Bernardino County Fire** in Fawnskin and help from the US Forest Service and CalFire. When a 911 call is placed for a fire, medical aid or traffic collision, it's Big Bear Fire that responds to most cases within the Valley, especially if an ambulance is needed. Downsizing is something many have experienced in the workplace and we've all learned to adapt, including Big Bear Fire. But as most people realize, there comes a breaking point, if you will, when the band cannot stretch any more. To continue to provide quality service, no matter what the business, additional resources are necessary.

Big Bear Fire Authority is the result of consolidating Big Bear Lake and Big Bear City fire departments, and bringing the former volunteer Baldwin Lake Fire Department under the umbrella. The consolidation has been good for the Valley. It has allowed those stretched thin resources some breathing room. The personnel have been able to adapt as one unit instead of separate agencies.

But growth of the Valley continues, and the resources are again stretching to the breaking point. Now it's up to the community to decide on the quality of service it wants and needs from its fire department. Big Bear Fire has presented three options, in addition to a do-nothing option. The do-nothing in our opinion isn't an option. Cutting services doesn't benefit anyone and could cost lives and property.

Option 2 would cost \$90 per year, Option 3 would cost \$150 per year and Option 4 \$240 per year. That's about 25, 41 or 65 cents per day respectively. In any case, the cost about what you find under the floor mats of the car, the couch cushions or a month's worth of specialty coffee give or take depending on the option and what size latte you order daily.

There have been several questions and comments about why the residents shoulder the burden when we have visitors who also need emergency services. Should those visitors pay more, shoulder more of the burden?

Those are good questions. We don't have all the answers. What we do know is that those of us lucky enough to call Big Bear home know that we live in a resort community. We rely on those visitors to keep our economy strong. Like it or not, the hospital, grocery stores and clothing stores as well as other services are because we live in a resort community. Big Bear is a tourist-driven economy.

We agree, some sort of balance is needed, but think about this. Do you invite guests to your home then ask for a donation to the tip jar to pay for the dinner you've put on the table to share? No. In the case of a tourist driven economy, we invite guests to our home/community. They pay their share in lodging and dining and lift tickets and sales tax on all the items they purchase, even gas and fast food.

All three options offer some positives for the Valley. We are still studying the details and asking more questions before recommending one of the three. What we do know is that doing nothing will only lead to disaster. None of us likes rate or tax increases. Everything costs more these days, and we are all looking for ways to make more and spend less. Yet, the thought of calling 911 and there not being an ambulance or fire truck to respond isn't something we are willing to accept.

There is one remaining Town Hall meeting set for Nov. 8 at Community Church Big Bear. We encourage you to attend, listen, ask questions, make suggestions. Make a difference.

http://www.bigbeargrizzly.net/opinion/editorials/weigh-the-options-share-your-thoughts/article_e76d5866-d19e-11e8-af53-d78d4703e572.html