



NEWS



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San Bernardino County Fire moves to expand coverage; property owners could pay \$157 a year in new tax

Sandra Emerson, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

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San Bernardino County Firefighters battle the Little Mountain Fire near the Shandin Hills area of San Bernardino, Ca., Tuesday, December 5, 2017. The brush fire threatens houses and apartments around Little Mountain Drive and Blair Park. (John Valenzuela/The Sun/SCNG)

After years of relying on the county's general fund to help cover the cost of its services, the **San Bernardino County Fire** Protection District is asking property owners in all of the county's unincorporated communities to pay up.

Fire officials want property owners in some parts of the county to pay a parcel tax of up to \$157 a year as part of a proposal to create a steady revenue stream for the district, which this year is facing a budget shortfall of \$29 million.

"For as long as I can remember we've operated at a deficit," said County Fire Chief Mark Hartwig. "As a taxing authority, we should be able to stand on our own."

To get that money, the fire district is hoping to impose the tax without a vote.

Hartwig has been hosting community meetings on the proposal to expand the fire protection service zone known as FP-5 to include all unincorporated areas before mailing out notices on Sept. 15.

"My goal is for everybody to have as much information as I can give them," Hartwig said. "This was my idea to my fire board. I'm taking the opportunity to get out to the community and present it myself."

After the notices are issued, property owners who oppose the tax have until Oct. 16 to submit written protests that could put the tax question to voters. In order to trigger an election, 25 percent of property owners who control at least 25 percent of the assessed land value would need to file written protests. To stop the tax, more than 50 percent would have to oppose it in writing.

The tax process, which follows rules set by the Local Agency Formation Commission, proved controversial a year ago, when Upland moved to join the district.

While some residents support the fire agency's expansion, others question a process that requires property owners to file written opposition to stop it or bring it before all voters.

"When you put a system into place that basically disenfranchises people, which is how I feel this is, I just don't feel it's right," said Laura Dyberg, president of the Mountain Rim Fire Safe Council, who added that she wasn't speaking for her organization.

“That’s a whole separate issue from whether or not they need the money, and whether or not they need the \$157 a year.”

Upside down

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

Also, the county’s more populous communities, and those already paying a fee for services, are subsidizing communities that are less populated and more remote.

This year, the district is again relying on its reserves and an estimated \$17.4 million through its agreement with the county.

In June, when Hartwig presented his budget to the Board of Supervisors, he offered three options to pay for future operations – continue using general funds, dramatically cut services, or expand the fire protection zone and collect money from property owners.

The board voted 3-2 to initiate the process of expanding the fire coverage zone, with an eye on collecting more money from property owners.

“We cannot continue to subsidize the high quality fire response times and services on the back of the general fund because it means other really important projects that we would have otherwise funded are not being completed and not being delivered,” said Fifth District Supervisor Josie Gonzales, who joined Supervisors Curt Hagman and James Ramos in voting for the expansion.

Gonzales said it is important to tell property owners how much fire services cost today versus how much those same services cost when their property taxes were set.

The expansion, if approved as proposed, would generate an additional \$26.9 million in revenue for the fire district, leaving it about \$2.4 million short of projected costs. Hartwig said such a budget would leave little room to improve services.

“I think my focus, more than anything, is to maintain the services that we have,” Hartwig said. “That’s the best way for me to look at it. And I’m hopeful that this revenue stream can be used as communities grow, to improve services.”

Second District Supervisor Janice Rutherford, who opposed the proposal because the process didn’t include a direct vote, said the fire agency needs to let voters decide on the quality of fire services they are willing to pay for.

“There’s a disconnect, and that disconnect has come about because the fire district and the board of supervisors have assumed that people want a high level of service,” Rutherford said.

“If people still want that level of service, they need to be willing to pay more. If they’re not willing to pay more, they need to understand what the new level of service is going to be.”

Who pays

If protests do not meet the 25 percent threshold, and if the Board of Supervisors gives final approval of the expansion in October, all the county's unincorporated communities would be brought into the zone.

The proposed expansion has caused some frustration among Grand Terrace officials, who recently pulled a proposed public safety measure from the November ballot that would have charged property owners a parcel tax to pay for sheriff's services.

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.

Communities not in the zone that pay a fee for fire services would have to start paying the \$157 parcel tax.

That tax, which would be paid by property owners, could go up by as much as 3 percent a year.

For some property owners in the communities in question, the new tax could represent a big change from what they currently pay for fire protection.

In Red Mountain, the \$157 a year tax would mean a drop from their current bill, which is \$192.47. But in Havasu Lake, where property owners currently pay \$139.59 a year, and in El Mirage, they pay \$9, the new rate would be higher.

In Mentone, property owners currently don't pay any fee. But Leonette DiMuro, a member of the Mentone Area Community Association who attended a recent community meeting on the issue, was more concerned to hear about the repairs needed at their local fire station than the fee.

"If they can give us an idea of what they need, maybe we can do a fundraiser just for that," she said, adding that she is comfortable paying the fee and supports the community's firefighters.

"I think they need the expansion," DiMuro said. "I'm just talking about the local community doing something for the local firefighters that we love and care about."

Mountain Rim's Dyberg, who has worked with fire agencies for 20 years, said she has supported previous increases for fire agencies. But the question now is about fiscal responsibility, she said. The fire district, in her view, needs to do a better job of showing why it needs the money.

"Just because someone's a firefighter or a police officer, you don't turn the other way and give them whatever they want."

A controversial process

When Upland became part of the county fire zone a year ago, as a way to save money, a decision by LAFCO to also include the unincorporated community of San Antonio Heights as part of that change led to contentious public meetings and court challenges that have yet to be resolved.

Heights residents went to court, describing the annexation — which included an annual \$150-plus parcel tax — as taxation without representation. A hearing on the issue is set for Nov. 9 in San Bernardino County Superior Court.

“I cautioned my colleagues on the board when we debated this that they should learn that lesson from the (San Antonio) Heights experience as well,” Rutherford said.

State law allows the expansion of the fire zone through a public hearing process. Hartwig, however, asked the board to also hold a written protest process as a way to better measure the opposition.

Here’s how that process works:

Every property owner can submit a written protest. If two people own a property, and both are opposed to the expansion, each would need to submit a protest to reflect their views.

If 25 percent of all property owners protest, their collective vote would also need to represent 25 percent of the assessed value of the area in question.

For example, if a 10 percent owner of a \$100,000 parcel submits a valid protest to the expansion, it would be counted as one protest with \$10,000 assessed value. If a husband and wife co-own a \$500,000 house, but only the husband submits a protest, it would count as a single protest with \$250,000 assessed value, according to County Fire Cpt. Steven Tracy.

Validation and tabulation of the protest forms will be done by a third-party contractor and calculation of the assessed value will take place during tabulation, Tracy added.

The Board of Supervisors, however, retains the option to call for an election even if the hard numbers fall short of the 25 percent opposition, said David Wert, county spokesman, via email.

What’s next?

Notices will be mailed to property owners Sept. 15.

Property owners against the expansion must mail in their written opposition by the close of business Oct. 15, or submit a written form, in person, by the end of the public hearing Oct. 16.

The public hearing is scheduled for 10 a.m. Oct. 16 at the government center, 385 N. Arrowhead Ave., San Bernardino.

If approved, the tax would start generating revenue for the district in 2019.

For more information visit county fire’s website.

<https://www.dailybulletin.com/2018/08/28/san-bernardino-county-fire-moves-to-expand-coverage-property-owners-could-pay-157-a-year-in-new-tax/>

Brush fire started following multi vehicle crash in Cajon Pass

Staff Writer, Victor Valley News

Posted: August 28, 2018



(Photos by Jessica Avila)

CAJON PASS, Calif. (VVNG.com) — Fire crews are on scene of an approximate quarter-acre brush fire in the Cajon Pass here Tuesday.

According to the California Highway Patrol incident logs, at 11:33 am, a traffic collision involving an SUV, a semi, and two other passenger vehicles were reported on the northbound I-15 near Kenwood Avenue. Moments later, the call was upgraded to a vegetation fire.

Firefighters with **San Bernardino County Fire** responded and located a vehicle on fire that had spread into nearby vegetation. Firefighters acted quickly and were able to create a wet line around the fire and have contained the fire dubbed the Pipman incident to approximately a quarter acre.

Three AMR units have been requested to respond to the scene, per San Bernardino County Fire radio traffic. CHP logs are reporting the no. 4 & 5 lanes are blocked as a result of this incident. Motorist traveling on the northbound side should expect delays.

Additional information will be updated as it becomes available.

<https://www.vvng.com/brush-fire-started-following-multi-vehicle-crash-in-cajon-pass/>

Driver extricated and airlifted after crashing into steel barricade in Adelanto

Staff Writer, Victor Valley News

Posted: August 28, 2018



The driver required extrication from the vehicle. (Hugo C. Valdez, Victor Valley News)

ADELANTO, Calif. (VVNG.com) — A man was airlifted to a trauma center after he lost control of his vehicle and slammed into a steel barricade here Tuesday.

At about 8:41 am, firefighters with **San Bernardino County Fire** were dispatched to a traffic collision with extrication at the intersection of Air Expressway and Adelanto Road.

Based on preliminary reports, the vehicle, a silver Nissan sedan was traveling eastbound on Air Expressway at an unknown speed when for reasons still unknown, the driver lost control of the vehicle causing it to jump the curb and slam into metal poles serving as a barricade around the exterior of a Kinder Morgan Handling Facility.

The solid steel barricades stopped the vehicle and prevented it from entering the facility which contains hazardous materials, according to a posted sign along the chain link fence.

Upon arrival, firefighters located the sedan with major front-end damage and the driver trapped inside the vehicle requiring extrication. According to fire radio traffic, the occupant was unconscious but breathing.

Following a brief extrication, county firefighters requested helicopter H325 to airlift the occupant to Loma Linda University Medical Center. The patient was transported by American Medical Response (AMR) ambulance to the medical helicopter at a nearby fire station.

The official cause of the accident remains under investigation by the Victor Valley Sheriff's Station.

<https://www.vvng.com/driver-extricated-and-airlifted-after-crashing-into-steel-barricade-in-adelanto/>