



NEWS



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VICTORVILLE — **San Bernardino County Fire's** union has put undisclosed sums of money into the campaign opposing the city's proposed half-cent sales tax for public safety, the Daily Press has learned.

The contribution by Professional Firefighters Union, Local 935 — confirmed recently by the organization's president and by the taxpayer group leading the anti-effort — forges a potentially awkward dynamic moving forward since the union represents one of two reported agency benefactors of the November ballot measure.

It also serves as a reminder, as a vote looms, that the politicized battleground now tied to the city's fire services is unlikely to resolve when the election does. In response to the union's challenge, a bewildered Mayor Pro Tem Jim Cox summed: "Nobody expected this."

The proposed tax, Measure K, is projected to generate an estimated \$8.5 million yearly, city officials say, and as a special tax must be earmarked only for bolstering services provided by County Fire and the Sheriff's Department, which both contract with the city.

Officials have already outlined plans for the supplemental cash, which they insist is desperately needed as public safety costs outpace revenues. Those plans include adding 15 new firefighter/paramedics and opening a fire station.

Cox said he had presumed the planned additions would have been viewed by the union as victories. But instead the union contributed funds to the Inland Empire Taxpayers Association, which has posted "Vote no on Measure K" signs across the city.

The exact amount spent should be revealed in public records during the next campaign finance reporting period before the Nov. 7 special election.

Jim Grigoli, president of Local 935, said the union's firefighters can't support Measure K without a pledge of how much revenue will be allotted to County Fire versus law enforcement and over concerns about what he described as the city's non-committal relationship with the department.

"All I'll tell you is that a public safety tax is, majority (of revenue) doesn't go to the fire department," Grigoli said by phone. "The second part is the city hasn't made any guarantees to us."

While city officials are fighting to keep local control of fire services, the union seeks assurance of County Fire's long-term presence in Victorville. The two objectives are inherently conflicting, however, because the most committed agreement possible — annexation — would mean the city abdicate such control.

The City Council's decision in February to vet different fire service agencies for a price-point comparison appears to have stirred the pot. When city leaders decided to terminate the County Fire contract, which officially expires June 30, they were steadfast it was done only as an exploratory measure and not as an indictment on County Fire's performance.

Despite early considerations of CalFire and the Apple Valley Fire Protection District, three options survived: a city-run department, a renewed contract with County Fire or annexation into County Fire. Officials view the

city-run option as a slightly cheaper plan, but have said the savings achieved would not enable the expansion of services they seek.

Yet Grigoli said already having pulled the trigger on annexation would have “given Victorville the funding to accomplish everything they wanted,” but the charted course instead has effectively put County Fire in a sort of limbo, he argued, and sparked speculation over job security if the city were determined to reactivate its own fire department.

“This could have easily been solved if they signed a long-term contract with us, but they didn’t,” he said. “And now we’re at the point that we can’t support something that will leave our guys without jobs.”

Grigoli continued that annexation — which would enact a \$153 yearly special tax on nearly 38,000 parcels in the city — made more sense than a sales tax “when the parcel tax is designed to serve property.”

But city officials increasingly sense that annexation, wherein County Fire assumes financial responsibility for equipment and stations, is being forced onto them. It’s been widely publicized, most recently by Councilman Jim Kennedy in an op-ed, that Measure K’s defeat will lead to annexation.

“I think a reasonable person would arrive at a conclusion that they simply want to oppose it,” Cox said of the union, “and hope that it will fail, to force the city to join into the county.”

<http://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20170921/county-fire-union-backs-opposition-to-victorvilles-public-safety-tax>