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Serial arson suspects plead not guilty to 20 felony counts

Jose Quintero, Daily Press

Posted: January 11, 2017, 9:18 AM

VICTORVILLE - The two Adelanto men arrested on suspicion of setting numerous fires at the Mountain Vista Apartments and several other local fires, including a fire at the J&K Feed and Pet Supplies in Hesperia, each pleaded not guilty in a Victorville courtroom to 20 counts of arson.

Prosecutors charged Gerald Paul Fontaine, 50, and Cody Michael McGee, 25, with the numerous counts of arson, with the oldest accusation dating back to Aug. 6, court records show. Both men, who are being held at High Desert Detention Center in Adelanto, appeared in court Tuesday afternoon via video and answered the charges.

Judge John Burdick raised McGee's bail from \$50,000 to \$100,000, court records show. Fontaine's bail remained at \$50,000, court records show.

They are both next due to appear in court on Jan. 19 for a pre-preliminary conference.

San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department deputies arrested McGee and Fontaine, 50, over the weekend at the Mountain Vista Apartments, located in the 15400 block of Nisqualli Road, during a "joint surveillance operation" after a dumpster fire at the nearby Golden Sands Apartment complex in Victorville, authorities said.

Investigators believe they are responsible for over 30 fires in the Victor Valley over the past six months. Authorities said that **San Bernardino County Fire Department** personnel had responded to 30 fires alone at the Mountain Vista Apartments since August.

Fire officials feared a serial arsonist was targeting the High Desert and set up a surveillance operation in conjunction with the Sheriff's Department.

<http://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20170111/serial-arson-suspects-plead-not-guilty-to-20-felony-counts>

Fire Agency Facing Budget Challenges

Heidi Fron, Mountain News

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Pictured: Chief George Corley (right) and Battalion Chief Mike Vasquez (left). Ananda Foerch

With the defeat of Measure B by Running Springs voters, the Running Springs Fire Department is now scrambling to find funds and alternatives to purchase needed supplies and equipment.

“It’s that time of year; we start on budgets now,” Fire Chief George Corley said, referring to the fiscal year that runs from July 1 to June 30. “The defeat of Measure B is going to have an effect. One of the things we keep doing is punching back some of the things we’re going to buy.”

A significant parcel tax measure—Measure B may have been overshadowed by the ruckus of the November 2016 election. Had it passed, it would have increased funding for the fire department. An impartial analysis of Measure B, prepared by San Bernardino County counsel, stated that the last assessment and collection of an annual availability charge for fire suppression service was in March 1980. That fee of \$65 per year on each improved parcel of property brings in approximately \$200,000, or 10 percent of the department’s operating expenses.

The fee has not been increased during the past 36 years. If the amount had been adjusted for inflation, the charge today would be \$163 per parcel per year.

Under Measure B, the proposed increase to \$146 per year, with no automatic annual increases, would have generated an additional \$250,000. That amount would have helped to fund operations, services, equipment needs and continued local control.

One of Corley’s objectives is to keep the Running Springs Fire Department independent. “If the county wanted to, it could take over. We’re hoping they don’t. But if they did, the county would move that assessment and the people would end up paying for it,” Corley predicted. He cited as examples the fire departments in both Twentynine Palms and Upland, where the county now charges property owners \$148 per year with an annual inflationary fee not to exceed three percent.

“The county doesn’t provide the hands-on everyday service that my people provide,” Corley emphasized. Adding to the staff’s level of commitment is the fact that staff members are long-time local residents.

However, that can make some decisions particularly difficult. While working on the new budget, Corley keeps in mind “The one thing you want to do is start budgeting before you’re in dire straights. Otherwise, you have to come up with an emergency plan, like laying people off.”

The defeat of Measure B could result in such adverse consequences. As to why the measure didn’t pass: “Some people are just tired of tax-raising,” Corley surmised. “They think we make too much, or that we have big pensions.”

But as the fire department’s Facebook page pointed out emphatically during the campaign, “This money would go to the department for things like equipment replacement and station maintenance/repairs, and current staffing levels, not to salary increases.”

Another misconception is important to clarify: The Fire Prevention Fee imposed by Cal Fire does not provide funding for the Running Springs Fire Department. Revenue from that fee is kept and used by the state of California.

“Cal Fire charges a certain amount of money to all land owners,” Corley pointed out. “That hurts us as well. We don’t get any of it.”

Cal Fire and the Running Springs Fire Department are two different agencies with different missions, and people think that Measure B was just another illegal tax that people objected to. “They associate us as all being the same, but we’re not getting any money from the Cal Fire fee,” Corley confirmed.

The Cal Fire fee is currently being challenged by the Howard Jarvis Tax Payers Association as an illegal tax that was not approved by the voters.

Meanwhile, without the Measure B funding, the Running Springs Fire Department is challenged by the pace of inflation. “The costs of providing fire protection and emergency medical services have greatly increased over the last 35 years,” Corley observed. “These are a few things we can’t get around. Emergency medical services go up 10 percent per year. Fire fighting equipment goes up even more than the inflation rate.”

With diligent maintenance, the department’s fire trucks don’t wear out. “But parts get out dated and we can’t get the right parts,” Corley said.

Inventory is another challenge. “There are certain things we are required to carry, and everything has an expiration date,” Corley explained. “We might use something only once every three years. It expires and we have to get rid of it. Then we have to buy a new supply and we might not use it again. The government regulates that.”

Another example is when a less expensive drug on the ambulance was effective, but the government made a law that required changing to a more expensive drug. “We had to get rid of the supply we hadn’t used, and had to buy the more expensive drug instead.”

Corley continued providing examples. “Simple things like our monitors, which we place on people to monitor their vital signs: That little box costs more than people’s cars do. If one goes out, we have to buy another one. We are lucky that ours have been working.”

Measure B would have given the community the best option for fire safety, ambulance services and advanced life support services, the department's Facebook page explained. In the long run, it would have been the least expensive option for the community for the future.

Following the defeat of Measure B, the department is deferring a lot of its projects and purchases, Corley said. "We are moving them down a couple years, looking at trying to buy an engine in fiscal year 2019/2020."

Another proposed measure might not be on the agenda this year, but will be some time down the road, he predicted. "You will get the fire department that you pay for, whether now or later," Corley concluded.

http://www.mountain-news.com/news/article_88ea196e-d85d-11e6-a737-074b002d5fa7.html

Lessons Learned At Copper Mountain College Active-Shooter Training Drill

Z1077 FM

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Photos Courtesy of San Bernardino County Fire





Copper Mountain College was the site of a joint active-shooter training drill early Wednesday morning. College employees and faculty participated in the drill, in which a Sheriff's deputy—portraying the lone shooter—simulated shooting and wounding 10 staff members as he moved from the student services center to the Greenleaf library, and on to other parts of the college campus, before he was captured and detained by law enforcement.

More than 70 officers from the Sheriff's Department, **County Fire**, County Probation, the California Highway Patrol, Morongo Basin Ambulance, the National Park Service, and the State Parole office convened at the college in the pre-dawn hours for the training exercise, which began about 7 a.m.

A combination of volunteers, mannequins, and training aids were used to simulate a multi-casualty, active shooter incident. Law enforcement, fire, and EMS personnel worked together to identify and capture the suspect, protect and evacuate the innocents, while simultaneously extracting and treating the wounded.

The simulated victims, who had fake wounds and were covered with stage blood, were placed into ambulances and driven to the child care center nearby, to the alarm of the center's employees and parents, who had not been notified of the exercise.

Participants said the active shooter drill allowed public safety officers to work together and train for a large-scale, mass casualty incident, and college personnel were familiarized with the "Run, Hide, Fight" response to an active shooting incident.

<http://z1077fm.com/local-news/todays-full-newscast/>