



NEWS



News Headlines 10/18/2018

- Fire fee passes; new charge to go on property tax bills
- EDITORIALS/OPINIONS

Fire fee passes; new charge to go on property tax bills

Stacy Moore, Hi-Desert Star

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MORONGO BASIN — Property owners everywhere in the Morongo Basin except Morongo Valley will be charged \$157.26 per year for fire services under a plan approved 3-2 by the county board of supervisors at the end of a public hearing Tuesday.

The **county fire** department will expand one of its zones, FP-5, across most of San Bernardino County, bringing with it the annual \$157.26 fee, which can be raised up to 3 percent each year.

“It’s bittersweet,” Fire Chief Mark Hartwig said after the expansion was approved.

“I don’t think you could listen to four hours of testimony and conversations with community members in the halls who clearly have a hardship and not be concerned for them,” the chief said.

Hartwig acknowledged the fee is a bitter pill. “Nobody has an extra \$157.26 lying around that they want someone to come in and take.”

In a Yucca Valley meeting in August, Hartwig told members of the public that the fire department might use some of its new revenue to move the fire station on Aberdeen Drive in Yucca Mesa closer to Twentynine Palms Highway in Yucca Valley.

Fire department spokeswoman Tracey Martinez said Wednesday no firm plans have been made.

“We will be looking at the computer model to make sure our response times are meeting the needs of the community and if it’s necessary to move that station to better serve our community,” Martinez said.

“We do things like that all the time. Communities grow, so it’s necessary to continually make sure that our stations are placed in the right location.”

No decision has been made yet, she said. “That station may not move, but it is important to note that at this time, the chief is not planning on closing that station.”

3 percent protest new fee

The fire district used a protest process to take a vote of property owners who would be affected. Property owners could download protest forms from the Internet and then mail them into the county. If a quarter of affected property owners who owned a quarter of the value of the affected land sent in protests, the FP-5 expansion would have to be approved by a public election. If half protested, it would be canceled outright.

Instead, just 3.2 percent of landowners sent in protest ballots, according to the company hired to count ballots.

The county sent more than 368,000 notices instructing landowners on how to protest. The county received 15,130 protest forms by the Tuesday deadline and 11,472 of those were verified.

That’s about 3.2 percent of affected property owners, representing less than 2 percent of the assessed land value — far too little to trigger a public vote.

‘That doesn’t seem fair’

Despite the low rate of return of ballots, the public hearing Tuesday was packed with citizens decrying the new fee and saying the voting process was rigged.

“You have selected the most unfair way to assess this tax,” Celeste Doyle, of Joshua Tree, said. “A flat tax per parcel, regardless of value or proximity of services, is just bogus.

“You have also selected the most difficult way for the property owners to resist this imposed tax,” she said.

“The protest form was not included in the notices; you need a printer, a computer and internet access to get it and there’s a time limitation here.”

“They made the assumption that everybody could get the form off the internet and that was really unreasonable,” agreed Claudia Sall, of Pioneertown. “It should have been provided with the mailing.”

Other speakers said they own several pieces of undeveloped land and the cost of the annual fee on each parcel outweighs the value of the property.

“You’re asking me to pay \$157 per parcel on pieces of ground that have no value,” said Ron Clark.

“The guy with the million-dollar home is going to be paying a much smaller percentage than the guy with the \$15,000 piece of property. That doesn’t seem fair.”

Chief told he can't rely on general fund

Hartwig said the new fee is needed because the fire department runs over budget every year and has relied on the county board of supervisors to fill the gap using money from the general fund. Last year, the deficit was \$11.9 million.

Hartwig said the fire department with its many zones and fees was created by the Local Agency Formation Commission in 2003. Commission leaders acknowledge they knew it would never take in enough money to survive unless the county board of supervisors filled in shortfalls from the general fund — or if citizens approved a new property tax.

But when he was appointed fire chief, he said, he was told to come up with a way to stop relying on money from the general fund each year.

“The CEO, as I sat with him when I was appointed and we discussed goals ... the biggest priority was to find a way to live with the revenue the fire district produces — in other words, to find a way off the general fund,” Hartwig said in a phone interview Wednesday.

Josie Gonzales, supervisor for the 5th District, made her position clear on the general fund spending during Tuesday’s hearing.

“I need to make it perfectly clear that as far as I am concerned, I will no longer support San Bernardino County fire receiving financial assistance from the general fund,” she said.

If the fire department had to operate on the revenue it gets today, Hartwig told the board he would have to close more stations, which would add anything from minutes to hours to response times.

The projected revenue from this charge is about \$27 million per year. The fee could be increased by as much as 3 percent each year by a vote of the board of supervisors.

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EDITORIALS/OPINIONS

Supervisor Lovingood the loser

Bill Tuck, Jr., Phelan, Daily Press

Posted: October 18, 2018

Yes me, Bill Tuck Jr., supported Supervisor Lovingood for re-election two years ago, along with his 5,000-vote lead from other supporters. He did some good things for all of us the first four years. I'm glad I did support and vote for him. I personally was hoping for some big moves forward when he became chairman of the Board of Supervisors.

He has become a liberal tax and spender. He supported a sales tax increase for the Sheriff's Department. By never, to my knowledge, publically saying the FP-5 fire fee was wrong he is actually supporting it. Some say he is working behind the scenes to stop it. I haven't heard a word anywhere about him working behind the scenes.

He has just plain done nothing for us in the High Desert in the past two years. A very prominent public employees union has said there is plenty of money in the county budget for pay raises and running the county, sheriffs and fire department. You know what? I believe them! Property tax rates are at an all-time high! Where's the money going?

The county supervisor is supposed to be a leader who stands up for the people. Supervisor Lovingood is now part of the machine of non-elected people who control the county. He no longer serves the people and needs to go in two years. We have some can-do politicians up here in the High Desert. Please think about running next time and start speaking out!

Two more years and Supervisor Lovingood will be up for re-election. We have a great home to live in. Drive down Arrowhead Street in San Bernardino from the 210 to the 10. You'll see just how good we're doing up here. We deserve and need our fair share of tax dollars up here. Let's make it happen.

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