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County Board votes down parcel tax hike

Martin Estacio, Daily Press

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San Bernardino County 2nd District Supervisor Janice Rutherford speaks during a meeting on Tuesday. The Board of Supervisors approved an annual parcel tax but with direction to staff to recommend alternative ways to fund fire services and a sunset date on the tax. Don Trapp, interim chief for the San Bernardino County Fire Protection District, gives a presentation to the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday. The district was asking for a 3% increase on an annual parcel tax [Screenshot from meeting video]

SAN BERNARDINO — The County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday decided against increasing a controversial annual parcel tax and left open the possibility the tax could be nixed altogether in the future.

The 4-1 decision came after a presentation by Don Trapp, interim chief for the **San Bernardino County Fire Protection District**, during the board's regular meeting.

The district was proposing to raise the newly-approved annual parcel tax 3%, from \$157.26 to \$161.98, the maximum allowable.

Second District Supervisor Janice Rutherford introduced a motion to approve the tax, which the board is required to set every year, and also request county staff to recommend alternative ways to fund fire services. Third District Supervisor Dawn Rowe proposed an amendment disallowing the increase.

The motion, which was approved, requires staff to submit recommendations to the board within 90 days. Recommendations would then be presented to voters on next year's November ballot.

The motion also imposes a sunset date around that time.

"I think it's a fair discussion for us to have and for the department to have with our residents and taxpayers about what level of service they're willing to pay for," Rutherford said. "Because there seems to be a disconnect on that front."

This year will be the first time the tax will be levied on parcel owners who were annexed into the expanded Fire Protection Zone 5, which now covers all unincorporated areas in the county and parts of some cities.

After a long and contentious meeting, the expansion was approved by the board in October. Most attendees who spoke publicly opposed the tax that came with the expansion.

Some said the tax would be a financial hardship. Some found fault with the county's imposing a tax on vacant parcels in which the risk of fire is minimal.

County fire officials have said the expansion and additional revenue is needed to address a \$29 million budget deficit, add to its reserves, fund capital improvements and possibly lead to independence from relying on money from the general fund.

Trapp said fire district costs had gone up 3.5% from last fiscal year.

Overall revenue from the FP-5 expansion would have totaled about \$42.7 million. The proposed increase would have amounted to about \$1.2 million, Trapp said.

Rutherford said that even though she opposed the expansion — she and 1st District Supervisor Robert Lovingood voted against it in October — she didn't want to abruptly stop the tax, which would have been an "untimely shock" to the fire district.

"I thought it was a matter appropriately put before the voters, since I believe the item to be a tax," she said.

Before the expansion was approved, the board had instituted a protest process modeled after the Local Agency Formation Commission which was not legally required.

Written notices were sent out to the more than 368,000 affected landowners.

If more than 25 percent with a quarter of the assessed land value sent protest letters back, the expansion would have been put before voters; 50 percent would have killed the proposal.

At the October meeting, county officials said just 3% of landowners' protests were received.

People at the meeting denounced this process also, noting how the protest forms weren't included in the mailed notices.

Three lawsuits have been filed against the county over the fire zone expansion. Two of them were decided in the county's favor, but appeals are expected, said County Counsel Michelle Blakemore.

One of those lawsuits, filed by the nonprofit The Red Brennan Group, alleged the tax was unconstitutional and should be implemented only by a two-thirds vote of the electorate.

On Tuesday, Lovingood said he prefers voters to decide the tax issue.

"I think it's obligated to go back out to a (Proposition) 218 vote. That's where I believe it belongs," he said. "I think the voters have a right on this. I don't think there was an opportunity for them to weigh in."

Lovingood voted no on Tuesday's motion, only after his own motion which would have stopped the tax failed to gain a second.

Rowe, who introduced the language to disallow the tax's 3% increase, echoed similar sentiments for her reasoning in a statement.

"Removing the proposed tax increase was the right move in light of the serious concerns I have over how the FP-5 assessment was imposed on citizens," she said. "I couldn't, in good conscience, support the increase before the public has a chance to vote on the matter."

<https://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20190613/county-board-votes-down-parcel-tax-hike>

Fire season preps: Free service allows Inland Empire mountain residents to clear defensive space

Rob McMillan, Eyewitness News abc 7

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With a late-spring heat wave moving into Southern California, residents in the mountain community of Wrightwood are getting ready for summer. They're also getting ready for fire season.

In a community that's dealt with its fair share of fires over the years, residents know all about the potential for a devastating situation especially with so much new growth.

"Look at something like the Paradise Fire (last November)," said John Aziz of the Wrightwood Fire Safe Council. "You know how quickly a community can go up (in flames)."

It's one of the reasons mountain residents take the threat of fires so seriously. And the reason why so many people were taking advantage of the Tri-Community Green Waste Recycling Days program last week. The program allows residents a convenient location to dispose of pine needles, dead branches and other contributors to fire danger found around the yard.

"Providing that defensible space makes a huge difference," said Aziz. "(It allows) the firefighters to be able to protect those structures."

The program is offered free of charge, and was made available by a cooperative effort between several agencies including the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**. Organizers said because the service is free and allows residents an easy place to dispose of green waste, it's given residents the extra incentive to make defensive space around their yards - especially with so much growth after a winter with above-normal precipitation.

"The rain brings on a lot of flashing fuels," said Aziz. "The fine fuels; the weeds and grasses."

The program moves to the Lytle Creek area on June 15. After that, it will move to various communities throughout the San Bernardino mountains for the last two weeks of the month.

<https://abc7.com/fire-season-free-service-allows-mountain-residents-to-clear-defensive-space/5344248/>