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EDH Fire eyes another big change

A joint meeting of the El Dorado Hills and Rescue fire boards on Oct. 6 gave El Dorado Hills residents a detailed overview of the potential annexation of Rescue Fire Protection District.

It was an informal meeting, with 30 or 40 people in attendance, and mainly attracted those who oppose an annexation or who had concerns. Everyone who wished to express their opinion was heard and, at times, interacted with fire board directors who were present as well as other officials. Similar meetings have been held in Rescue.

The panel was led by EDH Fire Chief Dave Roberts, who introduced the discussion and laid out the main issues. The full panel included El Dorado Hills Fire Board Vice President John Hidahl and Directors Jim Hartley, Greg Durante and Doug Hus; Rescue Fire District Vice Chair Ken Humphreys and Directors Anne Walker and Scott Thorne; El Dorado County District 3 Supervisor Brian Veerkamp and District 1 Supervisor Ron Mikulaco (Veerkamp and Mikulaco serve as the El Dorado County Board Fire Committee); El Dorado County Chief Administrative Officer Larry Combs and El Dorado Local Agency Formation Commission Executive Director José Henríquez (Veerkamp and Humphreys serve on LAFCO). Deputy Chief Thomas Keating also participated. Keating became chief of the Rescue Fire Protection District in 2006. In 2013, under a Shared Services Agreement, Roberts became fire chief of both El Dorado Hills and Rescue and Keating became deputy chief of both.

Chief Roberts began by recognizing that change is difficult. Even though they are neighbors, the two districts have different cultures and levels of funding. His presentation relied on the "Fire and Emergency Services Study for the El Dorado LAFCO" dated May 13, 2010 and done by Citygate Associates Inc. The three-volume study is available on edhfire.com.

The considerations fall into two categories: operational and financial. Another way to look at them is individual district vs. systemwide.

Emergency services are rated by speed and weight. Speed is critical to fight fires. Every minute of delay results in the escalation of the fire. If a unit is close, it may be able to respond early and control the fire with one engine. As the minutes tick by, more and more resources are required. Weight refers to the multiple units called in response to significant emergencies. The Citygate study found that fire stations are well located for speed of attack; however, the region has a staffing problem per unit which creates a weight of attack problem. There are often not enough firefighters or volunteers to staff the units. Ambulance service is the responsibility of El Dorado County. The issues of speed and weight apply to medical responses as well as firefighting.

The history of funding fire districts demonstrates the difficulties of adapting political jurisdictions to changing times. In most areas outside large cities, where fire and ambulance services are part of the municipal government, most fire districts are special districts, like water and schools. The services are paid for by the people served in the district. As costs rise for maintaining and replacing equipment and buildings, and as volunteers are being replaced by professional firefighter/paramedics, small districts are increasingly unable to sustain services.

Prior to Proposition 13, special districts were able to increase assessments to meet their needs. Now each county sets the percentage of property tax revenue for the special districts in their counties. In 1992

the Educational Revenue Augmentation Fund was passed statewide to protect school revenues. In order to provide ERAF, the special district revenues from property taxes were reduced by 10 percent. In 1993 the voters passed Proposition 17. The proposition added a ½ cent sales tax to replace revenue lost to ERAF for public safety. El Dorado County directed all Proposition 172 funds to law enforcement. Law enforcement is the responsibility of counties.

Fire district tax rates in El Dorado County are highly variable. Lake Valley, El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park are highest. Rescue is eighth out of 13.

In 2001 the Board of Supervisors redirected \$1.6 million from the general fund to the eight smaller underfunded fire districts, including Rescue. By 2009, with falling property taxes, that funding was discontinued. The loss of Aid to Fire plus the reduction in property tax resulted in a combined revenue loss of 36 percent to the Rescue Fire Protection District.

The fire chiefs and fire board directors from all districts are working with the Board of Supervisors on funding.

Rescue Fire Protection District has cut to the bone. If it loses its ability to serve its residents, neighboring districts have to respond. That affects both speed and weight of response negatively. With the Shared Services Agreement, El Dorado Hills is responsible for Rescue. Roberts added that with wildfires in the West, El Dorado Hills has had strike teams out from the end of June into September.

Former EDH Fire Board member Larry Brilliant said he couldn't support annexation. "The Cameron Park annexation attempt didn't work," he said. "I'm not in favor. At best, it will dilute the service level."

Several people said that if Rescue residents want fire services they should vote to pay for it.

Rescue director Anne Walker responded that the State Responsibility Area fee that rural residents have to pay for Cal Fire prevention has made it difficult for residents to assume even more financial responsibility.

Other discussions centered around the possible financial and operational impacts on El Dorado Hills Fire, comparisons to the Latrobe annexation and other options, including joining Cal Fire.

Rescue Vice Chair Humphreys said his district had considered every feasible option. Annexation was not Rescue's first choice. The district would prefer to be self-sustaining. Rescue cannot afford Cal Fire and would lose local control. "We don't expect stations like El Dorado Hills. We are rural," Humphreys said. "We have no outstanding debts. We paid cash. We never borrowed from the county."