

Sunday, April 17th, 2011 | Posted by [Mike Roberts](#)

EDH Fire gets a little smaller

The El Dorado Hills Fire Board spent last Wednesday morning behind closed doors grilling the “final four” fire chief candidates; April 26 is the target to announce the new chief. In the afternoon they opened the doors to finalize the latest district downsizing plans.

As a result of their actions, the new chief will have to get the job done with one less chief and three less firefighters.



Village Life photo by Mike Roberts

The two internal candidates for the chief position, Deputy Chief Jim O’Camb and Battalion Chief Dave Roberts, stuck around after their interviews and chatted with a clutch of self-described “budget watchdogs” who showed up to hear the district’s attrition plan, which enticed Battalion Chief Dwight Piper and Captains Dale Jankowski, Steve Enos and Mike Wilson, all at the top of their pay grades, to retire early. Their departures provide some desperately needed budget flexibility for the district, which is tapping its reserve to make ends meet in the current fiscal year, which ends in June.

The board’s previous exit incentive was \$75,000 cash or two years PERS credit. The new retirees, three of whom planned to stick around for at least three more years, ended up taking a lesser cash offer, \$50,000, plus the PERS credit.

The package was the result of negotiations between union leadership, district administration and consultant Dan Haverty, who’s been counseling the organization on strategies to shrink a potential \$1 million-plus budget shortfall for fiscal year 2011-12, which begins in July.

A working group of chiefs and union leadership is finalizing proposed cuts in several other areas, including compensation and benefits, according to Roberts.

The retirements are effective April 20. If either Roberts or O’Camb wins the top spot they have agreed to waive the chief’s salary for the balance of the fiscal year, “for the long-term health of the organization,” said Roberts.

Should the board decide on one of the two outside candidates, the two chief candidates asked the board to push the hiring date to July 1. The projected payroll savings will nearly offset the cost of the exit incentives.

The downsizing doesn’t do much to help out in the current fiscal year, which is on track to draw roughly \$700,000 from the district’s reserve fund, but positions the district to save \$608,000 per year going forward, according to Roberts’ calculations.

Union President (and boss) Tom Anselmo presented the working group’s suggestions to fill the vacant captain positions - promote senior engineers and firefighters. The battalion chief in charge of training, which is currently Roberts, would fill in as a shift battalion chief.

A second, temporary option would put off the upward cascade of promotions until the new chief is named, but would require that the remaining chiefs fill in for the retirees until then, an option that neither O'Camb or Roberts endorsed.

The overall staff shrinks either way, because Station 87 is being downstaffed from a four- to a three-person engine company and the vacant chief position won't be filled.

The board put off a decision on how and when to reorganize the district in response to the attrition.

After the meeting Piper explained that he planned on working at least another five years, despite recently arriving at retirement age. He got a late start in the fire service, and was unlikely to ever reach the 30 year service required to max-out his retirement benefit.

As such, he said, the two-year PERS credit was an important incentive. Piper's wife is currently home-schooling their five children in the family's three bedroom ranch home outside Placerville. "We're bursting at the seams," he said. With the early retirement, the family may relocated to Missouri to start a family business.

"Each of us (retirees) has his own financial situation," said Piper. "But we all wanted to do something to help the district get through this tight spot. It was also the best thing for the guys just starting out."

Captain Mike Wilson, a 33-year fire service veteran, explained later that he has a personal investment in the youngest members of the district. "The four guys at the bottom of the seniority list work for me," he said. "To me, making sure they had a place in this department was the biggest thing."

Wilson is an active fire service consultant and educator, and plans to continue working in retirement. "So I'll still have my hands in it," he said.

Haverty, the former Folsom fire chief and El Dorado Hills resident, advocated the attrition as a way to shrink the district without layoffs or cuts to service. He's also proposed that Station 87, located in the El Dorado Hills Business Park, be closed at night.

Watchdog Pete Cajacob praised the attrition as one of many steps needed to get the district "right sized," but wondered, "At the end of the day, will we have tried hard enough? I don't want to see them kick this thing down the road four or five years."

Fellow watchdog Dick Ross worried, "We've become accustomed to a certain level of service here, and no one wants to ask whether we can still afford it."

Ross applauded the district's thorough scrutiny of revenues, expenditures and its reserve, but asked the directors to examine a fourth factor, "the fundamental needs of the community," to determine "an acceptable level of service that can be provided at a reasonable cost."

"I worry that they'll do some nickel and dime things to reduce costs, and deflect attention from the real issue - compensation and employee (benefit) contributions - where there might be real savings," he said.

The district held formal color guard "flag ceremonies," to honor the retirees on April 16, 18 and 19.

mroberts@villagelife.com

Short URL: <http://www.villagelife.com/?p=6670>