

Barnidge: Opposed to a ConFire parcel tax? The alternative looks worse

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The scenario that Contra Costa Fire Chief Daryl Louder laid out for the district board last week was enough to make you look for the nearest hose. Seven to 10 fire stations could be closed. Firefighting personnel could be reduced by 30 percent. Calls answered would go down, response time would go up, and homeowners' insurance premiums would take a hit.

That's what is at risk, Louder explained, if a \$75 parcel tax is not placed on the November ballot and approved by voters.

"There won't be any part of our community that won't be impacted," he said.

Purely from a risk-reward standpoint, support for a parcel tax is what our sports friends call a slam-dunk. The fee translates to about 20 cents per day, and the payoff is peace of mind. It costs more than that to park for a half-hour in downtown Walnut Creek.

That the board voted to accept Louder's request and put the measure before voters hardly was a surprise. But that came only after several objections from members of the audience, which bespeaks a larger concern.

Some residents -- many, in fact -- have a deep distrust of the fire district. They think it is responsible for most of its financial woes and expects taxpayers to bail it out.

Sure, property taxes have plummeted for the past four years, denying the district much of its expected funding. And, yes, the cost for everything from vehicles to gasoline has increased. But runaway pension expenses, which keep taking larger bites out of the budget, are the shark circling in the swimming pool.

"Your rising pension costs are the reason you have no money to deliver services," Contra Costa resident Wendy Lack told the board.

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"The district's pension plan gets deeper in debt every year -- that's debt the taxpayers must pay."

Joyce Ellis, of Walnut Creek: "ConFire is responsible for reforming its pension system before any request should be made. They've known since 2010 that the department is operating in the red. Even with scare tactics -- closing fire stations and homeowners' insurance going up -- the voters have had it."

About that: These aren't scare tactics. Without more funding, services will be cut. Board members Mary Nejedly Piepho and John Gioia guaranteed that no one is crying wolf.

However, persuading the public that a temporary tax -- it sunsets in seven years - - is a first step toward Recovery Road is a larger hurdle than any you'll see in the Olympics.

Numbers plucked from the district's website reflect the rate at which the retirement monster will grow: \$14.5 million (14.5 percent of the budget) in 2012-13; \$17 million (16.6 percent) in 2013-14; \$20.1 million (18.8 percent) in 2014-15. The more spent on pensions, the less on services, which makes a skeptic wonder if a new tax only postpones an old disaster.

Board member Candace Andersen said as much when she cast the lone dissenting vote: "We're not showing the public how this is going to be sustainable."

There's a reason for that. Undoing the pension mess is like trying to pull free from a giant spider web.

Renegotiating terms for current employees is nearly impossible, Gioia said, because even if the union approved a deal any member who disagrees can sue. Voluntary reforms on an individual basis are prohibited by the Internal Revenue Service. The only likely option -- lower payouts for new employees -- will not help for years.

"It took us years to get into the situation we face today," Gioia said, "and it's going to take years to get out of it. We understand the need for changing pensions, but first we have to act to stop the bleeding."

That brings us back to the parcel tax, which looks like a Band-Aid for a gushing wound. Voters seem to have only two options: (1) vote in favor, or (2) stock up on fire extinguishers.

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