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East Contra Costa Fire Protection District



“The Fire District Must Begin to Build Solid Foundation” ECCFPD Fire Chief Brian Helmick

Brentwood - As Fire Chief, I am tasked with ensuring the best possible fire service to the residents within the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District. It is my job to build the best fire district possible with the funding available and to ensure we have the best firefighters responding to calls.

As of July 1st, ECCFPD utilizes three (3) fire stations to provide a rural level of fire service and emergency medical service (basic life support) to the residents and businesses in Brentwood, Oakley, Discovery Bay, Bethel Island, Knightsen, Byron, Marsh Creek, and Morgan Territory. ECCFPD protects approximately 249 square miles, over 110,000 residents, and responded to approximately 6,900 calls for service annually.

Although ECCFPD does not have sufficient resources to provide the urban level of service that is needed in much of the District, the District is financially sustainable as a three-station organization for the next 10-years. Additionally, we are fortunate to have some of the best and most dedicated firefighters working right here in the District.

Since the 2008 housing crisis, the District's effort to increase service to urban standards and obtain permanent funding have been crippled by failed ballot measures while limping along with temporary funding solutions. Unfortunately, what has been overlooked during these efforts is the impact on personnel retention, capital maintenance and equipment replacement. Continuing down the path of temporary funding solutions (or what some have described as Band-Aid solutions) will continue to weaken the District as it fails to retain entry level firefighters and train and promote them to the ranks of Engineer and Captain. Within the Bay Area, our District has been described as a training ground for other departments. Although this is true, the firefighters that left have given the organization a good reputation. Continuing to lose personnel we have invested so much training time and dollars in is unacceptable.

Since 2012, the district has hired 28-firefighters and in that same time period, the District has lost a total of 39 personnel (only 5 have been from retirements).

The Fire District is currently in a staffing **crisis** and measures need to be taken to build a solid staffing plan to support the base level of service for the District. I urge the public to understand that hiring entry level firefighters is not the problem; we can do that all-day

long, but it's counterproductive if they continue to leave for more secure and better paying jobs elsewhere. The issue is retaining them for the long haul, for a career as an Engineer or Captain, who are the drivers and leaders that make our system work. Currently, our fire fighters are paid significantly less than our neighboring fire districts. (As much as 30% less) within the Bay Area and East Contra Costa Fire District salary is the lowest in the Contra Costa County.

Although it takes a unique and special person to be a firefighter, a firefighter's employment choice is no different than for a teacher, a nurse, a laborer, or computer programmer. At the end of the day, everyone wants to find the best available job and job security to provide for their families. Would you continue to be one of the lowest paid employees in your industry or would you seek a position that provides you and your family a competitive wage compared to others in your industry?

For clarification, it takes two-years to promote from a firefighter to an engineer (the driver of a fire engine). As of July 1, 2017, the District does not have any firefighters with the experience necessary to test as an Engineer. Our current probationary firefighters still need at least 4-6 months to be eligible to test for the position of Fire Engineer. If our current probationary firefighters were to leave for a more secure position, at another department, the District would need to hire a new firefighter and the two-year clock would start over again.

Moving forward as the Chief of the organization, I will be making recommendations to our Board of Directors that will improve our personnel retention, increase staff morale, and fundamentally change the Fire District for the better. This process will not happen overnight, but my goal is to set the District and community up for long-term successes.

As we go through the planning process and hold decisions, it's important that the District begin working in a transparent and open manner to begin re-building trust with the entire community. Although there are many roads the District can take, and some may not always agree, we all as a community must begin working together on a common goal of improving the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District's funding and service level.

I look forward to starting the journey together towards the revitalization of our Fire District, which begins with investing in the foundation of the organization. Together, I know we will be successful in the coming months and years ahead.

Lastly, I ask that citizens and business engage with and support the District. The District's current financial situation and the resolution to the situation is complex. To participate or to learn more about the District, please visit the districts website. The website will provide information on the District and upcoming Fire Board, Finance, and Public Outreach meeting.

You can visit us on the Districts website, www.eccfpd.org or through our social media pages on Facebook (East Contra Costa Fire Protection District), Instagram (@east_contra_costa_fire) , and our YouTube channel (East Contra Costa Fire Protection District) for more information on the Fire District.

ABOUT THE EAST CONTRA COSTA FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT: The East Contra Costa Fire Protection District spans 249 square miles and our firefighter/EMTs serve more than 110,000 residents in the Cities of Brentwood and Oakley, the Town of Discovery Bay, the communities of Byron, Bethel Island and Knightsen, the Marsh Creek/Morgan Territory area, and all other areas within unincorporated Contra Costa County to the east of Antioch and to the southeast of Clayton