

# Money woes imperil Contra Costa fire districts

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**BRENTWOOD** -- The Great Recession has widened the gap between Contra Costa's rich and poor fire agencies, leaving several areas with fewer stations and slower emergency response times and the entire county less equipped to handle a disaster as an already destructive fire season grinds on.

While most fire agencies across the county are getting their fiscal houses in order after years of belt-tightening, the East Contra Costa and Rodeo-Hercules fire districts face continuing financial hardship, exacerbated by low tax rates and property valuations that are still below pre-recession levels.

A county board is commissioning a study focused on finding solutions for the districts, whose average response times last year were nearly two minutes slower than before the recession.

### Fewer fire stations

Major fire-prone areas of central and eastern Contra Costa County have fewer operating fire stations than ever before.



Fire agencies with closed stations	Number closed	2007	2014	Median response time
Contra Costa County Fire Protection District	4	5:27	5 min, 23 sec	
East Contra Costa Fire Protection District	5	5:46	7:21	
City of Pinole	1	5:01	5:30	
Fire agencies with no closed stations				
Crockett-Carpinez (Oakland district)	0	6:52	5:47	
City of El Cerrito (Walshington)	0	4:23	4:23	
Orinda-Meraga Fire Protection District	0	4:54	4:58	
City of Richmond	0	4:52	4:50	
Rodeo-Hercules Fire Protection District	0*	5:24	7:39	
San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District	0	5:17	5:30	

\*One station closed for part of 2014.  
 Note: The East Bay Regional Park District and CalFire each staff one station in Contra Costa County.  
 Sources: Fire agencies; Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission; 800-454-4539 (SPUR)

Staffing is especially low in East Contra Costa, which has had to close five of the eight fire stations it operated in 2008. With only 10 sworn firefighters per shift covering a parched 249 square miles, including Brentwood, Oakley and Discovery Bay, the district must call for help from other fire departments, sometimes from as far away as Tracy, simply to put out a fire.

"Everybody is concerned," Oakley Mayor Doug Hardcastle said. "And anyone who's not concerned needs to have their head examined."

The upcoming study will be undertaken amid a larger debate over the level of fire service communities should expect in an era of tighter budgets, and whether the best remedy is more taxpayer money or a retooling of fire departments, which mostly respond to medical calls.

Ernie Wheeler, a Rodeo-Hercules board member and retired assistant chief at Travis Air Force Base, said staffing wouldn't be an issue if firefighters went back to focusing on fires and let ambulances handle medical calls. A relaxation of state-mandated training requirements for reserve or volunteer firefighters, he said, would also help boost manpower.

"At some point, we lost a sense of what a fire district really needs," he said.

For Contra Costa Fire Protection District (**ConFire**) Chief Jeff Carman, whose agency **has shuttered four of its 28 firehouses** and has 18 fewer firefighters working every shift since the recession, the biggest need is more full-time firefighters.

If East Contra Costa or Rodeo Hercules don't pull their weight, he said, that strains other agencies, especially when there's a major incident.

"When you run out of fire engines, you shouldn't expect that someone will always come to the rescue," said Carman, who runs the county's largest fire district -- which often struggles with its own call volume. "We're the fifth-most industrialized county in the state, and we live on earthquake faults. **We do not have enough firefighters.**"



East Contra Costa firefighter captain Robert Ruddick, of Station 52, works on a desktop computer in Brentwood, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 28, 2015. Over the

Overall, Contra Costa is home to 11 firefighting agencies that staff 57 stations daily -- 10 fewer than in 2008.

Cities impacted by reduced staffing include wildfire-prone Lafayette and south Walnut Creek, where ConFire closed stations with low call volumes. In West County, Pinole closed one of its two stations, and Rodeo-Hercules, which is dependent on a soon-to-expire grant, could be forced to once again close its Rodeo station, leaving just one open.

Nevertheless, median response times have held relatively steady except in East Contra Costa and Rodeo-Hercules, where they jumped from about 5½ minutes before the recession to more than seven minutes last year -- by far the slowest in the county.



East Contra Costa firefighter captain Robert Ruddick, of Station 52, poses for a photograph in Brentwood, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 28, 2015. Over the past

Firefighters say every second counts in an emergency, but it's difficult for them to quantify the impact of slower response times in terms of fighting fires and responding to medical calls.

Rodeo-Hercules Chief Charles Hanley pointed to a 9-acre fire this summer just outside his district in rural Martinez that burned down a house, killing a dog inside, as an example of the impact of nearby station closures.

"That fire wasn't contained quickly," Hanley said. "The more water and more people you get there, the faster the fire is going to go out."

East Contra Costa Chief Hugh Henderson said his fire engines are now frequently being beaten to emergency calls by ambulances. ConFire, by comparison, arrives before the ambulance 50 to 70 percent of the time, Carman said.



East Contra Costa engineer Larry Bennett, of Station 52, checks on the engine oil of the fire truck in Brentwood, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 28, 2015. Over

Starting next year, ConFire's dispatch center will be able to track available ambulances, which Carman hopes will reduce by about 25 percent the number of engines sent to minor medical calls.

Still, he said, it would be prohibitively expensive to get private ambulances to respond to all medical calls.

East Contra Costa and Rodeo-Hercules' money woes date back nearly 40 years to Proposition 13, which set in stone the share of property taxes earmarked to local government entities such as cities and schools.

At the time, both communities were mostly undeveloped and didn't need to devote much money to fire protection. As a result, East Contra Costa receives 8 percent of that tax revenue. Rodeo-

Hercules gets 9 percent, although some of it goes to pay off the debt of Hercules' former redevelopment agency.

By contrast, ConFire is slated to receive 14 percent, the San Ramon Valley Fire District 15 percent, and the Orinda-Moraga Fire District 21 percent.

East Contra Costa's fiscal problems turned dire when the foreclosure crisis hit in 2008, devastating its already paltry property tax base. While foreclosures weren't as big a problem in Rodeo and Hercules, the assessed value of the Phillips 66 oil refinery in Rodeo was nearly halved during the recession, costing the fire district about \$900,000 per year, officials said.

"As a fire district, we rely heavily on property values," San Ramon Valley Fire District Chief Paige Meyer said. "And the fact is that our property values weren't hit as hard as others."

With a bigger, more stable tax base, Meyer's district and the neighboring Orinda-Moraga Fire District were able to keep stations open even as they dealt with multimillion-dollar budget deficits and spiraling pension costs during the recession. Likewise, city fire departments in El Cerrito and Richmond, both of which have special taxes supporting them, have kept services intact.

But the wealthier departments have no interest taking over their poorer neighbors.

Rodeo-Hercules couldn't find any takers recently when it explored contracting out for services or consolidating with a neighboring agency.

"Why would anyone take on our problems?" Hanley said.

Henderson said fire agencies have less incentive to join forces these days because they have already thinned out their upper management and support staff.

"A lot of those economies of scale can no longer be achieved," he said.

For now, Rodeo-Hercules' financial future is primarily tied to a \$900,000-a-year special tax that property owners approved but has been challenged in the courts.

East Contra Costa property owners twice rejected a similar tax proposal. Leaders are gearing up for another tax measure, while also working on a temporary plan to open a fourth station until the election using funds from Oakley, Brentwood and the county.

For Supervisor Mary Piepho, of Discovery Bay, a tax hike is the only solution. "The question is how do we gain (the voters') trust and how do we explain to community members that this is dire?"

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