

# ROLLING MEMORIAL



MATHEW SUMNER — Staff photos

**TOM ANDERSON** (above) of San Mateo, with the help of Bob Payton (below), has turned his personal fire engine into a memorial for deceased firefighters by stenciling a prayer and names onto its side. He named the engine after St. Florian, the patron saint of firefighters.

## Friends use truck to honor fallen firefighters

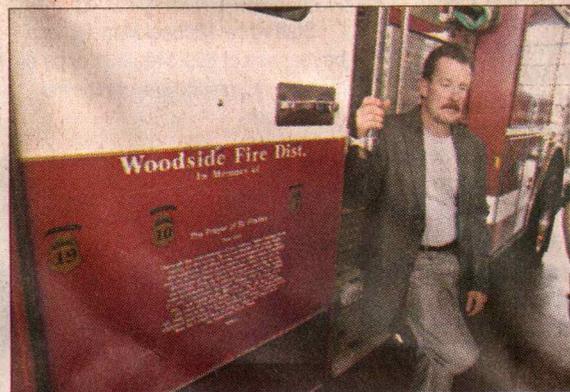
By **Michael Manekin**  
STAFF WRITER

**BELMONT** — Tom Anderson likes to say he grew up in a firehouse.

His dad, a San Mateo firefighter, began bringing Anderson to his fire station at age 6, and he soon fell in love with the big-time action, heroic stories and fraternity atmosphere of a bunch of guys doing the best job in the world.

Anderson, now 35, never did grow up to be a firefighter — the wait-lists for the jobs were too long — but his longtime appreciation for the profession recently evolved into something enormous: a vintage fire engine that he has personally restored to become a “rolling memorial” to the county’s fallen firefighters.

Standing inside Fire Station 14 of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department, Anderson pointed to a poem on the rear passenger door of the gleaming red engine: “When I am called to duty, God, wherever flames may rage, give me strength to save some life, whatever be its age.”



“That’s the Firefighter’s Prayer,” Anderson said. “In the place you live, there are firefighters out there every day putting their lives on the line for you. People take that for granted.”

Please see **TRUCK**, Local 8

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# Friends make rolling memorial for firefighters

► **TRUCK**, from Local 1

Anderson, a fire engine fanatic whose favorite hobby is restoring these classic rigs, has dedicated his latest repair job to every deceased firefighter in the county.

With his friend Bob Payton — a 48-year-old volunteer firefighter with the Woodside Fire Department — Anderson would like to cover the bright red engine with hundreds of gold badges alongside the names of the county's fallen firefighters. The great majority of firefighters to be memorialized have died off-duty of natural causes, Anderson said.

So far, Anderson and Payton have stenciled five names on the truck — firefighters who once served in the Woodside and Belmont-San Carlos fire departments. Both men have approached a handful of additional fire departments in the county, and

they're hoping that fire officials support the memorial.

"We would like to get as many names as we can on here," Anderson said. "This is something we're trying to do for the county. We're not out to make money on this."

Anderson said he was inspired to create the memorial when he was putting the finishing touches on the engine — his seventh restoration project, a 1991 Beck Ottawa engine that once served in the Salt Lake City Fire Department. He kept the number on the rig — "Engine 117" — but something inspired him to stencil "St. Florian Fire Department" on the engine's side.

The name was a tribute to St. Florian, the patron saint of firefighters, and it occurred to Anderson that this engine could become something more than just another reconstruction project.

Now, Anderson and Payton plan to integrate the engine into the lore of the county's

firefighters. Ideally, the St. Florian would roll into memorial services for each of the county's fallen firefighters — honoring the recently deceased with a badge and a name on the flanks of the truck.

"If we run out of room, we'll have to get another engine," said Anderson.

Until then, Anderson and Payton say, they will continue pitching their idea to local fire departments. They'll show off the St. Florian proudly throughout the Bay Area, appearing in parades and at car shows and toy drives.

Hopefully, the life and tradition of St. Florian is just beginning, Anderson said.

"I'm trying to do this for a good purpose," he said. "It's a passion of mine. It's in my heart, in my blood."

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GEORGE PISCITELLO

**FIREFIGHTERS** battle an early morning blaze in Belmont on Tuesday. The fire charred and gutted the home of a 77-year-old woman, injuring a firefighter and causing more than \$1 million in damage.

## Fire forces evacuation of woman

■ Belmont blaze injures firefighter; damage estimated at \$1 million

By Michael Manekin

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — An early-morning blaze gutted the Belmont home of a 77-year-old woman Tuesday, injuring a firefighter and causing more than \$1 million in damage.

The two-alarm fire, at 3308 Plateau Drive, raged for more than an hour and left the white-shingled single-family home a charred ruin.

Neighbor Richard Gong, 48, said he was the first to spot the fire. He was out outside walking his dogs when the smell of smoke led him to his neigh-

**The two-alarm fire, at 3308 Plateau Drive, raged for more than an hour and left the white-shingled single-family home a charred ruin.**

bor's garage, where, he noticed, flames had engulfed the entire structure.

Gong called 911.

"They said, 'How big a fire is it?'

And I said, 'The whole house is burning down!'

Firefighters received the call at 6:49 a.m., according to officials.

Gong and another neighbor kicked open a side gate, which was hot to the touch, and began pounding on the side windows of the house.

It appeared that the elderly woman in the home was still lying in bed half-awake, said Gong. But she escaped when she heard the banging, he said.

"She came out with nothing but her pajamas on — that's it," South County fire Chief Doug Fry said.

By the time firefighters arrived, the first floor of the home was fully en-

(OVER)

# Belmont blaze injures firefighter

► **FIRE**, from Local 1

gulfed in flames, Fry added.

Firefighters controlled the blaze around 8 a.m., but the damage had already been done.

"It's pretty much a total loss up there," said Fry.

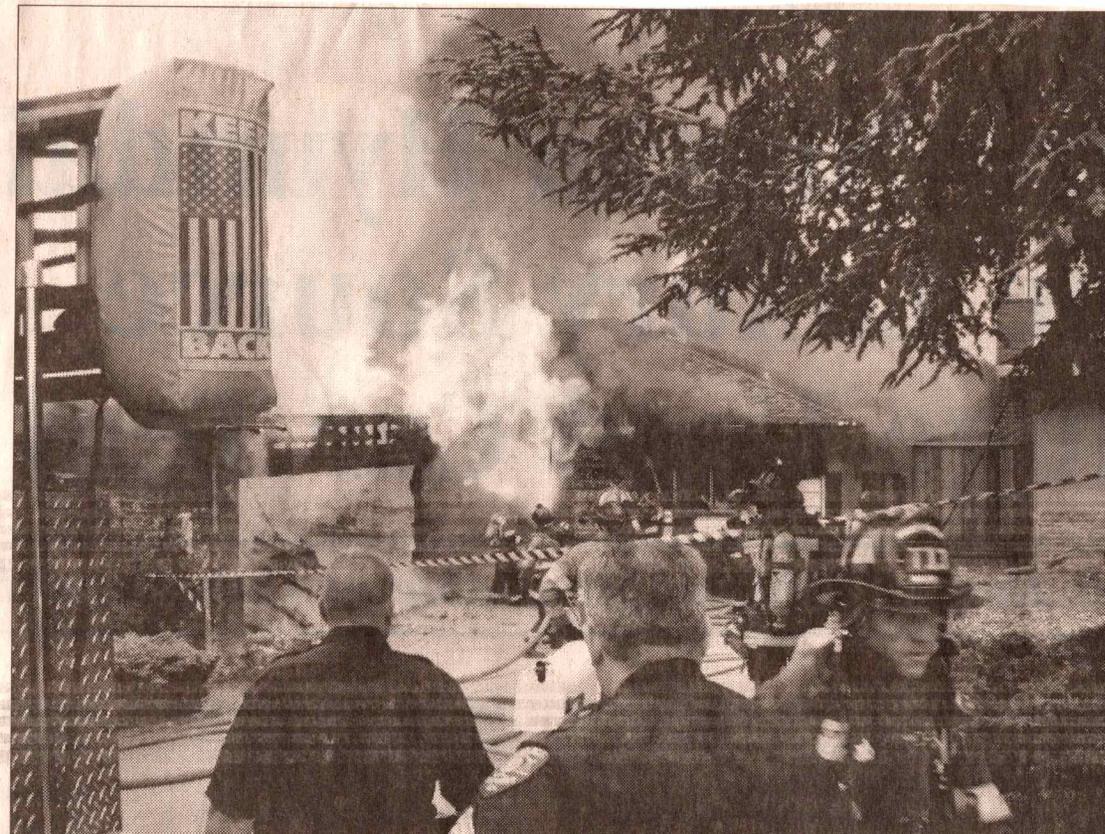
One firefighter fell through the home's floor and into a converted bedroom-basement, Fry said. He was transported to Sequoia Hospital to be treated for burns and cuts to his legs, he said.

Meanwhile, the owner of the home refused interviews and police declined to give her name.

"This is a traumatic thing, you know, having your house burn down," said Sgt. Mike Brake, adding that he wanted to respect her privacy.

"What can you say — it's horrible," said a neighbor across the street who invited the woman inside to avoid watching the fire destroy her home.

When asked how the woman



GEORGE PISCITELLO

**FIREFIGHTERS** battle an early morning blaze in Belmont on Tuesday. The fire charred and gutted the home of a 77-year-old woman, injuring a firefighter and causing more than \$1 million in damage.

was coping, the neighbor replied that "she's doing as fine as can be expected."

Structural damage to the home is estimated at about \$1 million. Some \$250,000 worth of belongings also were destroyed, Fry said.

Hours after the fire, black-

ened books, kitchenware and an assortment of unrecognizable bric-a-brac were scattered in a pile of ashes outside the home. At the top of the pile lay a mound of water bottles that firefighters had downed while dousing the blaze.

Firefighters believe the fire

began in the home's garage, but were still investigating the cause Tuesday evening.

The woman who lost her home went to the East Bay with her son, Fry said.

Staff writer Michael Manekin can be reached at (650) 348-4331.

FIKE VETI,  
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OVER

# District mulls countywide fire agency

■ 'It would be difficult and challenging mixing agencies that have different funding levels and mechanisms'

**By Neil Gonzales**  
STAFF WRITER

MENLO PARK — Menlo Park Fire District board members are mulling whether San Mateo County would be better off having a single agency to oversee fire and emergency services countywide.

The board Tuesday night reached a consensus of having staff research the issue further before formally asking the San Mateo Local Agency Formation Commission to study establishing such a consolidation to improve services and provide them in a more cost-effective way.

The discussion comes as consolidation talks and renewed partnerships among fire agencies continue to happen across the county.

"There's been a lot of talk from firefighters from across the county of trying to encourage consolidation," board President Ollie Brown said before the meeting.

But Brown said numerous issues have to be addressed first before a countywide agency could be developed.

Leaders of the cities in the county would need to weigh in, he said, and certain jurisdictions would be wary of losing autonomy. He added that a feasibility study would be expensive.

During Tuesday's meeting, Brown said he's resistant to take a formal stand supporting a proposed countywide consolidation of fire services, but "I'm open to looking at it."

Peter Carpenter, director of Menlo Park's fire district, said the board has talked about the issue over the years and seems to view consolidation as "a desirable thing."

Carpenter believes the board should eventually take an official position on it.

"If enough bodies speak out on this issue, we can make progress on this," he said.

LAFCO Executive Officer Martha Poyatos said several factors would complicate a countywide consolidation.

"It would be difficult and challenging mixing agencies that have different funding levels and mechanisms," said Poyatos,

**"There's been a lot of talk from firefighters from across the county of trying to encourage consolidation."**

**Ollie Brown**

Menlo Park Fire District  
Board President

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who heads the agency that approves jurisdictional boundary changes.

If a study is undertaken, she said, it would need to identify several issues including where savings could be made and the number of fire chiefs to have.

"It would be quite a big project," she said, adding that the commission has no money set aside for such a study.

Currently, the county's fire

agencies include various city departments and districts. Also, the county contracts with the state Department of Forestry to help provide fire protection in unincorporated areas.

About \$165 million a year is spent on fire protection county-wide, according to Poyatos. There are about 60 fire stations and some 750 full-time firefighters in the county.

Consolidations are already happening on a smaller scale.

A merger between the Half Moon Bay and Point Montara

fire districts is set for this summer while the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department was recently saved from dissolution after those two cities reached a joint-powers agreement.

The Menlo Park board also discussed the possibility of opting out of the county's ambulance program in favor of creating a district-run system. But directors did not make a decision on that matter by press deadline.

Brown said the board would like to see ambulance response times in the district improve.

A county Emergency Medical Services official could not immediately be reached for comment.

The existing system is a public/private partnership involving the American Medical Response ambulance company, the county and local fire agencies. South San Francisco, however, has its own program.

Staff writer Neil Gonzales covers Redwood City, Menlo Park, Atherton and East Palo Alto. He can be reached at (650) 306-2427 or by e-mail at [ngonzales@sanmateocounty-times.com](mailto:ngonzales@sanmateocounty-times.com).

# Cities come to agreement on fire plan

By Will Oremus

MEDIA NEWS STAFF

San Carlos and Belmont fire board representatives on Monday took what may be the final, major step in resolving their longstanding controversy over how to pay for their joint fire department.

The four fire board members — two councilmembers representing each city — agreed in principle on a novel cost- and revenue-sharing plan that they hope will gain the approval of their respective city councils. If all goes well, the cities could finalize a new joint powers agreement to govern the fire de-

partment within the next few months.

The board had already cleared a big hurdle in January by settling on a “funding formula” to split the bulk of the department’s \$11.4 million annual operating budget based on factors such as population and calls for service. The latest thorny issue was how to split about \$12.5 million in future employee pension costs.

On Monday, the fire board members decided to divide those costs according to the same formula as the general budget, with the stipulation that the cities also divide certain fire

department revenues along the same lines.

For now, that should mean that San Carlos shoulders a bigger portion of the costs, but takes in a larger share of revenues as well.

For decades, the cities had split the department’s costs 50/50, but Belmont became uncomfortable with that division as San Carlos grew larger.

The department would have been rescued financially if voters in each city had passed a \$2.3 million annual assessment last fall, but that measure failed, sending the cities back to the drawing board.

After months of hand-wringing, number-crunching and sometimes bitter debate, the cities’ leaders now appear to have the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department back on the brink of stability.

A willingness on both sides to “give and take” has been the key, said San Carlos City Council and fire board member Matt Grocott. Monday’s compromise involved San Carlos acceding to Belmont’s desire to apply the funding formula to the pension obligations, while Belmont agreed to San Carlos’s idea of applying it to some revenues as well.

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SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
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# Fire board inks new joint deal

■ Belmont-San Carlos to share revenue, costs

By Will Oremus

MEDIA NEWS STAFF

With smiles and handshakes, the board of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department unanimously approved a new joint powers agreement Monday night.

The respective city councils will vote on the agreement in April. Their approval would finally put the beleaguered joint fire department on solid ground after years of uncertainty and wrangling about its future.

The agreement calls for the cities to share both the costs of running the department and some of the revenues it generates according to a formula hashed out at the eleventh hour last December. Disputes between the cities over how to pay for the department had put it on the brink of dissolution several times in recent years.

"We came to an agreement that respects the wishes of each city council," fire board member and Belmont City Council Member Warren Lieberman said at Monday's meeting. "I believe it's a great deal for both cities."

Funding challenges will remain. The department is operating on a bare-bones budget, because voters have repeatedly nixed ballot measures designed to pay for equipment upgrades, budget reserves and firefighters' pension plans.

Still, Lieberman said he's "very optimistic" the city councils will stamp the deal next month.

"I give a lot of credit to the hard work that all the current and past fire commissioners have put in on this," he said. "At the end of the day, everyone who lives in these two cities is just going to be much better off from this agreement."

# Fire inspection fees will be charged, retroactively

By Will Oremus  
MEDIANEWS STAFF

Hotels and apartment complex owners in Belmont and San Carlos may have thought they were off the hook for fire inspection fees between \$300 and \$600 last year. No such luck.

After a brief debate, the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department's board voted 3-1 to retroactively charge for mandatory fire inspections conducted in the 2004-05 and 2005-06 fiscal years. The move reverses a decision made by the former fire chief in 2005 to drop the fees amid staffing shortages and uncertainty over the department's future.

Collecting the old fees will bring a windfall of about \$179,000 to the joint fire department at a time when it is feeling a serious money pinch. It's on track to meet its "bare bones" budget for the current fiscal year, but it will need much more money in future years to replace aging equipment, build a budget reserve and meet new accounting requirements for employee pension costs.

Board Member Matt Grocott suggested forgetting about the lost fees for 2004-05 and

charging only for 2005-06 and 2006-07 at the end of the current fiscal year, since the fees are typically collected on a two-year cycle. He cast the lone dissenting vote on the plan to bill retroactively for 2004-05.

"I don't think it's fair," said Grocott. "If I own a business and an agency forgets to bill me for a year, I've already spent that money elsewhere."

Grocott in fact does own a remodeling design business, though it's not affected by the fire fees, which apply only to residential buildings. The fees range from about \$150 a year for buildings with three to 10 units to about \$300 a year for those with 26 units or more.

The fire department also inspects schools and jails, but laws prevent it from charging fees for those inspections.

Board Member Warren Lieberman said he understood some business owners might be upset by the decision. But he said he also saw a pressing need for the fire department to collect the money, given its financial state.

"I'm willing to bite the bullet and get hit with a little bit of flak in order to not lose \$85,000 for the fire department," he said.

Fellow Board Member Bob Grassilli added, "We're not trying to double-hit anybody. . . . Due to issues in the fire department we missed a year, and now we're collecting that money a year late."

The board agreed that not collecting the fees in 2005 was a mistake, in retrospect. Chief Doug Fry said the decision was made inside the fire department, not by the fire board, and it was partly because the employee who had overseen the collection had been cut due to budget shortfalls. The other reason was that there was much doubt whether the joint fire department would even continue to exist after property tax measures to fund it failed at the polls.

Grocott said he feared the back-billing might be seen as retribution against business owners who in part vetoed the assessment in last fall's election. He clarified after the meeting, "I know for a fact that's not the motivation. I'm just worried some people will view it that way."

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FIRE UNIT  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
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## A wet, slick day in Bay Area



Staff photos by **JOHN GREEN** (above) and **RON LEWIS**

**FIREFIGHTERS** and paramedics remove a driver from a car on Highway 101 in Belmont on Friday afternoon. Slick roadways were the cause of many accidents on Bay Area freeways. A pedestrian walks under an umbrella (right) as rain falls Friday in San Mateo.

FILED  
S. F. CHRONICLE  
FEB. 17, 2007

**BELMONT**

**Fire engulfs house,  
but family escapes**

Four family members lost their Belmont home to a fire Saturday morning, a Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department marshal said.

The four adults living in the house at 308 Chesterton Ave. escaped the fire with no injuries. Two were awake when the fire started at 9:30 a.m., and the two who were sleeping woke up when smoke detectors went off, said Belmont-San Carlos Fire Marshal Jim Palisi.

"They went to investigate the alarms and saw smoke. They immediately evacuated, and by then people were banging at the door and windows, telling them to get out," Palisi said.

Firefighters responded to the blaze a few minutes after it started and had it under control by 10:15 a.m. The fire caused about \$200,000 in damage to the home and \$100,000 in damage to its contents, Palisi said. A house next door sustained about \$35,000 in heat damage.

The fire started in the living room, where combustible materials were left too close to a gas heater. It quickly spread through an exterior wall and into the attic before engulfing most of the house, Palisi said.

FIRE DEPT.  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIME  
JAN. 5, 2007

# Fire board gives OK on new way to split funding

■ Commissioners believe action will keep Belmont-San Carlos department operating

**By Christine Morente**

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — Fire commissioners supported a new funding formula Thursday that they believe will keep the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department afloat after July 1.

Now it's up to the San Carlos City Council and Belmont City Council, sitting as the Belmont Fire Protection District board, to approve the formula Monday and Tuesday respectively.

The formula allows Belmont to pay 47.4 percent and San Carlos 52.6 percent of the department's budget. That takes into account population, assessed valuation, call volumes and fire companies.

"It's not over, but it's good," said Commissioner Warren Lieberman, vice mayor of Belmont.

The Board of Commissioners — made up of two council members from each city — has been working hard to keep the fire department and its board of commissioners together after property owners in both cities struck down fire assessments that would have raised \$2.26 million a year for 15 years.

For some time, the Belmont fire protection district board has been threatening to write a letter of dissolution if San Carlos doesn't agree to pay 53 percent of the budget by July 1. That percentage was also based on population, assessed value, the number of calls, fire stations, companies and employees in each jurisdiction. Currently, both cities pay equally.

At the Thursday meeting, however, the commission was reminded that the new formula still doesn't address future fleet maintenance or saving money for reserves.

"We're just kind of walking a tightrope, waiting for something to happen," Fire Chief Doug Fry said.

In response, Commissioner Matt Grocott said an internal operational audit is necessary to look at what is getting paid. He added that the formula would be acceptable to the San Carlos City Council if it had a shelf life of at least a year.

Commissioner Bob Grassilli also voiced support for the formula and said he will recommend it to the San Carlos City Council.

"For the last two weeks, our fire services have saved lives through fire and emergency calls," he said. "Hopefully (the council) will see the formula the way that I do, and we can move forward and dig into this a little deeper."

The San Carlos City Council meets at 7 p.m. Monday at City Hall, 600 Elm St. The Belmont Fire Protection District board meets at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at One Twin Pines Lane.

JAN. 10, 2007

# Belmont OKs fire funding formula

■ Council follows similar  
move by San Carlos

**By Christine Morente**

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — The Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department is no longer on the brink of collapse.

On Tuesday, the Belmont City Council — sitting as the Fire Protection District — agreed in concept to a funding formula that requires San Carlos to pay 52.6 percent of the joint department's budget and Belmont 47.4 percent.

The decision came on the heels of the San Carlos City Council's approval of the same formula. Last week, the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department Board of Commissioners also favored it.

At the Belmont meeting, the council did ask Fire Chief Doug Fry to pinpoint the actual cost of running a healthy department. He projects it to be \$12 million annually, which includes the department's unfunded liabilities.

The plan came after property owners voted down fire assessments that would have raised \$2.26 million a year for 15 years. The funding model takes into account the two cities' populations, assessed valuation and call volumes. Currently, both cities pay equally.

At the meeting, Councilman Dave Warden's temper rose when he said he doesn't want a bare-bones budget anymore. He also accused San Carlos' staff of being biased and inaccurate in staff reports.

"They're going to poison this department, if they haven't already," Warden said to San Carlos Councilman Matt Grocott, who then was at the podium. "This is supposed to be a win-win situation. It shouldn't be adversarial."

Grocott suggested having Thomas Fil, the fire board's financial adviser, present at San Carlos meetings and field questions. Grocott also assured Belmont officials that San Carlos will be able to pay its share of the budget. A utility tax could be considered.

"We have to increase revenue to the city," Grocott said. "But we don't necessarily want to tie ourselves to a fire assessment. We do have things going on that might help us out."