

House fire devastates Belmont hills home

FROM STAFF REPORTS

BELMONT — Firefighters from the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department, assisted by those from San Mateo, Foster City, Redwood City and CalFire, needed about 35 minutes to control a house fire in the 1800 block of Mezes Avenue Friday night.

The fire, reported about 8:35 p.m., apparently began in the living quarters of a hillside home on a cul-de-sac. The kitchen and bedroom/living room were "sub-level," with the garage on top, according to Belmont-San Carlos Fire Chief Doug Fry, which was a challenge for arriving firefighters.

"They had a hard time determining where (the fire) was at," Fry said. "But once they determined that, it was pretty well involved."

A second alarm was turned in, which brought the help from surrounding jurisdictions. No one was hurt, as the woman who lives at the house wasn't home at the time. Firefighters evacuated houses on either side as a precaution, Fry said.

Bob Cissna, who lives a few doors away, said he and his wife saw the flames shooting into the air after their son told them about the fire.

"We were concerned, because flames were shooting out one of the windows and there was a chance a tree would catch fire. We certainly don't need another Oakland Hills situation up here," Cissna said, referring to the devastating 1991 fire.

Fry agreed the location is a concern.

"It's a heavily wooded area up in here," he said, "and with the house set back from the street and the trees forming a canopy to cover it, our concern was with the heat — even though it's been raining, embers could have ignited something else."

Fry estimated the damage at \$150,000 and said the cause of the fire was under investigation.

FIRE DEPT.
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
FEB. 2, 2008

MIKE DEPT,
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
FEB 23, 2008

Ex-San Carlos mayor's case still out on appeal

By Shaun Bishop

MEDIA NEWS STAFF

REDWOOD CITY — Former San Carlos Mayor Mike King returned to court Friday for a status report on his appeal of a conviction for conspiring to defraud the former South County Fire Authority.

He made a brief morning appearance before San Mateo County Superior Court Judge Barbara Mallach, who presided over the April 2006 trial in which he was convicted on felony charges of filing a false claim to defraud the fire department and conspiracy with intent to defraud.

Though King was sentenced to 45 days in jail and three years of probation, he appealed the ruling to the California Court of Appeal in San Francisco. Mallach had agreed to stay the sentence until the appeal is completed.

The three-judge panel has taken pre-trial briefs but has not yet set a date for oral arguments, said San Mateo County Chief Deputy District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe.

Wagstaffe said his office wants to keep tabs on the case to ensure King completes his sentence if the appeal is rejected.

"It may not seem like much," Wagstaffe said, "but we want our 45 days to be served."

San Mateo County prosecutors said King tried to collect \$13,320 from the fire department through a fraudulent invoice filed by Margaret Collier, a political consultant.

Collier, who later pleaded no contest to misdemeanor fraud, was seeking payment for promotional work she did for the failed 2003 Measure I campaign.

Cal Fire maps pinpoint at-risk areas

By Alan Fackler

MEDIANEWS STAFF

Fire-hazard maps released this month by state fire officials identify areas of Hillsborough, Belmont, San Carlos and Redwood City as having a very high risk of fires — which is news to many residents.

"I never heard that this place was at risk," said Gina Roh, a 30-year resident of heavily-wooded Hillsborough. "I'm surprised nobody . . . has told us anything."

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, now known as Cal Fire, has released preliminary fire-hazard maps for all of California, including San Mateo County. Final versions of the maps, which detail areas in need of new state-mandated fire-protection standards, are tentatively scheduled for release in early March.

Susan Asberry, a 14-year Hillsborough resident, discovered that fire safety was an issue when she remodeled her house 10 years ago.

"I get pretty nervous as it gets drier around here. One match could ignite this place."

Joe Kahn

Hillsborough resident

.....

"When we were remodeling our roof, we were told that it had to be fire-retardant," Asberry recalled. "Our doors had to be changed, too. We had to have our fan systems checked; they basically told us what to do."

Cal Fire's new maps have been generated using advances in fire-protection technology and will replace older, less detailed maps that were developed in the mid-1980s. The maps illustrate three categories of hazard: moderate, high, and very high.

Areas with moderate to very high fire risks are concentrated in the hills just east of Interstate 280 and on the Coastside in places such as Half Moon Bay and Pacifica.

"When designing the maps, we look at the worst-case scenarios involving fuels and assign a fuel model," said Dave Sapsis, Cal Fire's senior fire scientist. "The scoring routine is driven by slope, fuel type, and fire weather."

Sapsis said the amount of fuel, or potentially flammable vegetation, is a major factor in determining high-risk areas. Slope, or topography, is important as well, because fires tend to burn faster on steep hills. Fire weather describes the conditions, including air temperature and humidity, that contribute to the spread of wildfires.

Though the maps make clear that several communities in the county are at a very high risk for

wildfires, Sapsis noted that the maps are preliminary, and could change after further scrutiny and review.

"The maps are composed of so many variables," said Cal Fire Regional Fire Chief John Ferreira. "Fuel densities, weather patterns — there are so many layers. When those layers are overlapped with one another, they sometimes produce odd results."

Ferreira said Cal Fire will be working with local agencies in urban high-risk areas to better prepare them for fire emergencies. The department has already implemented its plan to increase fire safety and awareness in rural high-risk areas.

The first focus of the plan is on "defensible space," which refers to the amount of vegetation surrounding a structure in a high-risk area. Cal Fire expects to work with local towns and cities to modify the vegetation within 100 feet of homes to make them more fire-resistant.

Embers from a wildfire can travel as far as a mile, potentially putting residents with heavy vegetation surrounding their homes at severe risk, according to Cal Fire's Web

site.

Doug Fry, chief of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department, said Belmont's fire risk is related to its surrounding canyons, which are often difficult to safely access.

Fry said he is looking forward to working with Cal Fire and noted that his fire station will be planting a small garden outside the station with various fire-resistant plants to show residents what types of flora pose less of a fire danger.

The second focus of Cal Fire's plan is making new structures "ignition resistant."

To that end, Cal Fire has approved state mandates requiring that new buildings in high-risk areas be constructed with ignition-resistant siding and decks, double-paned windows, ember-resistant eaves and wall vents, and enclosed overhanging decks.

This new set of requirements went into effect for California's rural areas in January, but will not go into effect in urban areas until July.

Joe Kahn, a 21-year resident of Hillsborough, wasn't surprised at all to learn that his small town was a large fire risk.

"It's common sense, really," Kahn said. "I mean, look around. It's a heavily wooded area.

"I always pray for the rain season to start. I get pretty nervous as it gets drier around here. One match could ignite this place."

People aren't left in the dark in regard to fire hazards when choosing their homes, said Don McFarland, a real estate agent in San Mateo.

"We have to know about fire risks when we sell homes," McFarland said. "It's become a habit to do all of our inspections up front, to make the sellers aware of the condition of their homes, and the potential dangers around them. We have to disclose everything to our buyers."

Whether these new state ordinances will have any effect on the process of purchasing a home in a high-risk area remains to be seen.

Jeffrey Tateosian, an insurance broker in Burlingame, said gauging the fire safety of a home is typically done with little or no consultation with state requirements.

"It's not based on maps or anything like that," Tateosian said. "It's more along the lines of individual cases. It's based on an individual pair of eyes and an opinion. If our inspector determines that there's too much brush around your property, we simply won't offer fire insurance."

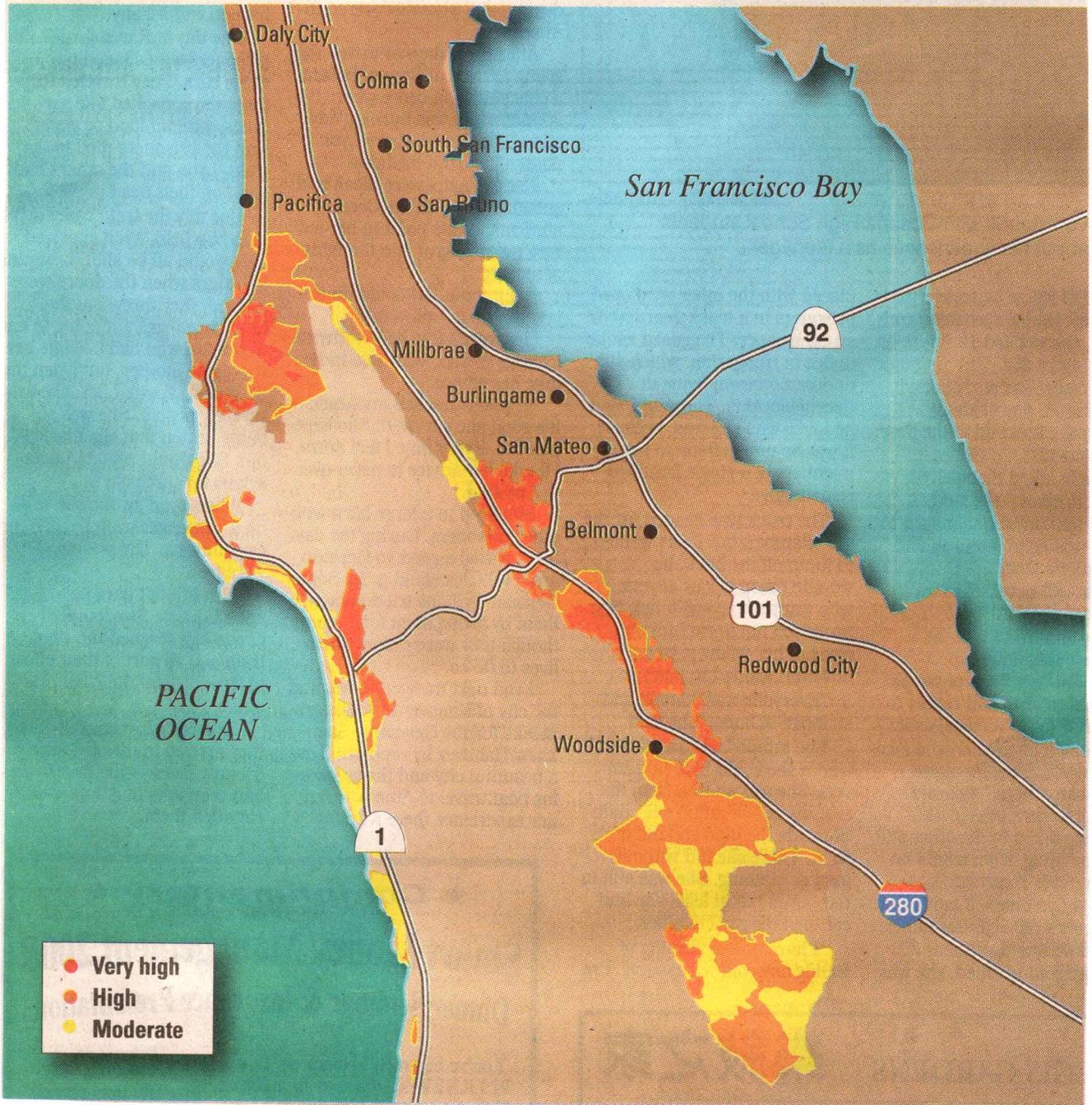
FIKE VU L I I
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
FEB. 24, 2008

(OVER)

Fire-Hazard Update

Threat assessment

A new Cal Fire map shows several areas of San Mateo County are at a high risk for fires.



BELMONT-SAN CARLOS FIRE DEPARTMENT
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
MARCH 1, 2009

Belmont-San Carlos department turns out top firefighters

■ Three from department recently promoted to chiefs of Bay Area stations

By Elizabeth Pfeffer
CORRESPONDENT

The Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department is on fire.

In three years, three of its long-serving employees were appointed to fire chief positions in the Bay Area.

Each had put in at least 25 years and worked together as battalion chiefs in the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department.

The succession began in 2006 when Doug Fry, 52, became chief of the Belmont-San Carlos department, formerly the South County Fire Protection Authority. He began his firefighting career there at 19, and has been with the department for 34 years.

Shortly thereafter, Dan Belville, 48, was promoted from deputy chief to fire chief of the San Mateo Fire Department in late 2007.

He was just one year out of his 26-year run at Belmont-San Carlos before the promotion.

Most recently, on Nov. 22 of last year, Richard Price, 47, was appointed to fire chief of the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, which covers East Contra Costa County.

He was with Belmont-San Carlos for a little more than 27 years.

"It's an unusual thing to have them all promoted in the last couple of years," said Jim O'Donnell, a retired Belmont-San Carlos battalion chief and fire marshal who hired and trained each of them in their late teens to early 20s.

They were reunited face-to-face at Price's swearing-

in a couple of months ago, though their personal and professional lives continue to overlap.

Fry and Price live in Danville, one of the cities in Price's jurisdiction, and Belville lives in San Carlos, which Fry is still charged with protecting.

Belville likes to joke at work that he only lives four fire stations away.

"We stay in contact quite a bit," Fry said. "I do think we all ended up where we ended up for a reason."

Transitioning from veteran battalion chiefs to fledgling fire chiefs is challenging, but they all attribute much of their success to working together at Belmont-San Carlos.

Firefighters can climb a 100-foot ladder in seconds, but moving to the highest rung of the employment ladder can take decades.

In the early 1980s, Price

said, the department's emphasis on continued education was very unique. Salary increases were directly related to education and certification milestones.

Many Belmont-San Carlos firefighters earn master's degrees while working full time.

When they were up-and-coming battalion chiefs, Fry handled the fleet, Belville was a numbers guy and Price thrived on computers.

"Most jobs aren't like that," Price said. "When you're not there, nobody's sitting at your desk."

As fire chiefs, they continue to collaborate and share ideas with one another.

"It's not typical to have three battalion chiefs within an organization go out and become fire chiefs," Fry said. "It says a lot about the type of organization we had."



SAN RAMON VALLEY FIRE DISTRICT

SAN MATEO FIRE CHIEF Dan Belville, left, and Belmont-San Carlos Fire Chief Doug Fry, right, pose with Richard Price at his swearing-in ceremony as San Ramon Valley Fire District chief last month. All three men served in the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department for at least 25 years before becoming chiefs across the Bay Area.

TERRORISTS, BEWARE



JOHN GREEN/STAFF

SGT. AARON REPPAS, of the Army National Guard Civil Support Team, holds a device used to measure hazardous materials Tuesday at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont.

The Belmont-San Carlos fire department hosted the show-and-tell demonstration. Civil Support Teams were founded under the Clinton administration to help state and local governments coordinate under the threat of chemical or biological terror threats. Beginning with 10 teams in some of the most densely populated states in 2001, the number of groups has steadily expanded to most U.S. states and territories.

FIRE DEPT.
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
JUNE 17, 2009

MIKE ROSENBERG
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
MAY 11, 2010

FIRE CONSOLIDATION

San Mateo makes bid for San Carlos

'Initial pitch' offers firefighting services at \$5.3 million a year

By Mike Rosenberg

mrosenberg@bayareanewsgroup.com

SAN MATEO — In offering to run the fire department for San Carlos, the city may be able to take advantage of a nearby community's financial circumstances to improve its own.

The San Mateo Fire Department on Friday submitted a five-page proposal to provide fire services in San Carlos for \$5.3 million a year. The five-page proposal is vague, and officials consider it to be an "initial pitch."

The report says an expanded San Mateo Fire Department would staff three firefighters at

a time at the two fire stations in San Carlos, but it is unclear which agency these firefighters would come from. The report says layoffs would be unlikely under a consolidation.

The report does not specify any savings that San Mateo, which has a \$5 million deficit after plugging an \$8 million gap last year, could reap from the deal.

"I think it's something that we have to look at. The cost of providing services is so high," San Mateo Deputy Mayor Jack Matthews said Monday. "I think we're bit-by-bit going toward a more consolidated firefighting and emergency response service. That's kind of the wave of the future."

Officials in San Carlos have voted to dissolve the department by late 2011 and are shopping the city's fire services to save money. San Mateo's only competition thus far is the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, which says it can offer fire services for \$3.5 million to \$4.3 million, although other cities may submit plans in coming weeks.

San Carlos now pays \$6.2 million for its half of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department.

San Mateo Fire Chief Dan Belville said taking over San Carlos' fire service could be a way to avoid future cuts to his roughly 85-person department. During the last two years, the department has trimmed its number of firefighters and forgone some training to save cash.

By adding another city to the mix, San Mateo could share with San Carlos the cost for administrative jobs and overhead expenses such

"If an agency grows with more players, that keeps diluting those costs. Perhaps this will be a catalyst for other agencies to join together."

— San Mateo Fire Chief Dan Belville

as equipment replacement. The benefits would be similar to those which occurred with the creation of the Central County Fire Department, which has saved Burlingame and Hillsborough more than \$1 million annually.

"If an agency grows with more players, that keeps diluting those costs," Belville said. "Perhaps this will be a catalyst for other agencies to join together."

But the plan is not simple. Officials would need to determine which firefighters would stay with Belmont or be hired by San Mateo

to serve in San Carlos, for instance, as well as which equipment belongs to San Carlos or Belmont.

While San Carlos leaders have a decision to make, San Mateo's council — which was not asked to authorize the proposal — would have to approve the deal, as well.

"The bottom line for me is not cost savings," said Councilman David Lim. "It can't come at the cost of compromising our public safety."

Unless talks advance, the two cities will continue to negotiate through their respective city managers and fire chiefs.

San Mateo has in the past decade submitted proposals to join or take over fire services for Belmont, Foster City and Cal Fire's Tower Road station in the unincorporated hills above San Mateo. But each time the proposals did not advance.

Staff writers Shaun Bishop and Joshua Melvin contributed to this report. Mike Rosenberg covers San Mateo, Burlingame, Belmont and transportation. Contact him at 650-348-4324.

OVER

MIKE DEPI.
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
MAY 8, 2010

SAN MATEO

Plan aired to take over San Carlos fire services

By Mike Rosenberg

mrosenberg@bayareanewsgroup.com

City officials have submitted plans to take over the San Carlos Fire Department.

The five-page proposal from San Mateo Fire Chief Dan Belville, released late Friday, says the city could operate fire services in San Carlos for \$5.3 million a year. San Mateo joins Cal Fire as the two agencies that have submitted proposals since San Carlos officials said they were likely to outsource fire services, along with the police department, to deal with budget woes.

Belville said the city would try to hire as many firefighters from the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department as possible, although they would be San Mateo employees and be paid wages given to San Mateo firefighters.

Under the proposal, firefighters would work a three-platoon, 56-hour workweek.

"The city of San Mateo and San Mateo Fire Department will provide outstanding services, leadership and direction for managing emergency services in these troubled times," Belville said in the proposal.

(OVER)

MIKE ROSENBERG
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
MAY 24, 2010

BELMONT

Fire changes begin to smolder

Dissolution of cities' joint department leads to important debate

By Mike Rosenberg

mrosenberg@bayareanewsgroup.com

Faced with losing their joint fire department, Belmont officials on Tuesday will begin debating the best — and most affordable — way to fight fires and respond to medical emergencies.

The Belmont City Council, acting as the Belmont Fire Protection District board, will launch what will likely be a lengthy process on the future of the city's fire services. The board must establish a new fire department by October 2011, when San Carlos will pull out of the joint fire de-

partment that has served both cities for the past 37 years.

Acting City Manager Thomas Fil said officials, with the help of consultants, will study whether to create the city's own fire department or contract services to Cal Fire or another local department.

Belmont could also share some fire services with other cities, as San Bruno and Millbrae do now, or potentially find a new partner with which to merge.

Officials will not make any decisions at the meeting but will likely give their first thoughts

Officials have already made clear that they would prefer to keep the same level of service over saving big bucks, but the city is facing a 7.5 percent drop in spending for the fiscal year that begins in July after a 10 percent dip this year.

on which options they would like to consider. They have already made clear that they would prefer to keep the same level of service over saving big bucks, but the city is facing a 7.5 percent drop in spending for the fiscal year that begins in July after a 10 percent dip this year.

Fil said the city will pay three consultants — an attorney, a fire-

services expert and a certified public accountant — to aid in research. The trio also helped Belmont officials when they were deciding whether to remain fire part-

ners with San Carlos in 2006 and 2007, a process that ultimately led the two cities to sign a new deal in April 2007.

The team will have to study how each option would affect the quality of service, costs and more.

San Carlos officials in April voted to give Belmont an 18-month notice that they would be leaving the department, which is required

under the joint agreement. San Carlos leaders, who are facing bigger budget problems than their Belmont counterparts, decided to contract out their fire department to save money but have yet to pick an agency to provide those services.

In a response letter dated May 4, Fil made sure to call San Carlos leaders' attention to a provision in the agreement that requires both sides to "delegate all their firefighting resources and responsibilities to the joint fire department until the dissolution date."

Belmont officials have not been willing to talk about service cuts to the department, which leaders in San Carlos have asked to explore.

Contact Mike Rosenberg at 650-348-4324.