

# Fire-tax ballot measure arrives

Outcome will decide future of two fire departments

By Beth Winegarner  
Staff Writer

SAN CARLOS — The hour is drawing near for property owners to determine the fate of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department.

Voters will find ballots in their mailboxes early next week asking them to approve a tax assessment aimed at raising \$2.3 million for the 26-year joint Fire Department, which narrowly avoided dissolution at the hands of both cities early this year. Ballots, which will be mailed Friday, are due back Nov. 14.

Officials in both cities have spent recent weeks pounding the pavement and explaining the tax plan to potential voters — some of whom helped defeat Measure I, a \$3 million property tax in support of the former South County Fire Department, which failed to win the two-thirds majority needed for passage in November 2003. The failure of that measure forced the department formerly known as the South County Fire Authority to lay off seven fire-

fighters and ultimately led to its reorganization.

"We have not focused on a Plan B [if this fails] ... but there's a whole domino effect of things that are going to happen," Belmont Councilmember Dave Warden said.

The Fire Department faces a number of belt-tightening actions if the measure does not pass, including further brownouts of its fire stations, increased overtime and worker's compensation costs and a potentially major hit to firefighter morale.

However, the all-mail ballot has earned support from several quarters, including residential groups in San Carlos and Belmont and property owners in the Harbor Industrial Area, according to Grott.

The San Carlos Chamber of Commerce voted last week to endorse the assessment after many businesses said they'd be willing to support it, according to chamber President Sheryl Pomerenk.

"We endorsed it, despite reservations about the larger [tax] burden to the business community," Pomerenk said. "I think everyone understands that the alternatives are not good."

San Carlos has adopted a tax structure in which, if the assessment passes, homeowners would pay \$99 per year and businesses would pay between \$243 and \$322 per year, depending on the type. In Belmont, homeowners will be asked to pay a maximum of \$93 per year while commercial property owners would pay roughly 6 cents per square foot.

*bwinegarner@examiner.com*



Warden



Pomerenk

BELMONT-SAN CARLOS FIRE DEPT.  
EXAMINER/INDEPENDENT  
OCTOBER 1, 2006

BELMONT-SAN CARLOS FIRE DEPARTMENT  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
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# Fire assessment ballots in mail

■ Tax would support services for next 15 years if passed

By Christine Morente

STAFF WRITER

On Thursday, property owners' mailboxes in Belmont and San Carlos will have something extra special inside beside the usual assortment of holiday catalogues — the fire assessment ballots. Voters in the two cities have 45 days to return them to their respective city halls.

For the last three weeks, Belmont and San Carlos firefighters have been going door-to-door educating property owners about an assessment that will maintain fire services for the next 15

years.

Mailers have also gone out.

So far, supporters of the tax are optimistic, but also have an "anxious anticipation" for the results, said San Carlos Mayor Matt Grocott, who is also on the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department board.

"I was telling the firefighters that once the ballots are mailed out, they can use their anxious energy to go out, walk, and talk to the folks," he said. "But two weeks past the mailing date, there's not going to be much to do but sit and wait."

In Belmont, an annual tax of \$93 per property would raise \$1.06 million a year for 15 years. In San Carlos, a \$99-a-year per property assessment

## Where to send ballots

Belmont City Hall, City Clerk, One Twin Pines Lane, Suite 375. If you lose or misplace your ballot and need another, call (650) 595-7413.

San Carlos City Hall, City Clerk, 600 Elm St., 2nd floor. If you lose or misplace your ballot and need another, call (650) 802-4219.

would raise \$1.2 million, also for 15 years. Commercial businesses in both cities will be assessed based on the property's square footage.

A simple majority is needed to pass the assessments.

Ballots must be returned to the City Clerk's office of the property owner's respective city hall by Nov. 13 in San Carlos, and Nov. 14 for Belmont. Ballots will be counted and results will be announced those nights.

If both assessments pass, they would pay for a cross-staffed ladder truck and fire engine service, fire-fighting personnel, and a fund to replace fire vehicles and equipment.

And each year, the two city councils would be required to re-evaluate the fire department's costs, and the amount assessed to the property owners if need be, Grocott said.

Meanwhile, if both assessments fail,

or if one city passes the assessment, the two councils would decide what the next step would be, said San Carlos Councilman Bob Grassilli.

He said operating, equipment, and pension and medical-liability reserves have already been set up.

"Basically, we have to have funds for

people who are going to retire and who will get sick, so we don't have to go back to the electorate and say 'We're short,'" Grassilli said. "We need to make sure we can get through 10 to 15 years, instead of going hand-to-mouth."

Grassilli said he is still optimistic that the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department would be viable if one assessment fails.

Betsy Armstrong, who lives on Debbie Lane in Belmont, said she received her

mailer and is not yet 100 percent sure how she will vote.

"My feeling is we do need to have police and firemen working 24 hours a day, so I'm looking at supporting it," Armstrong said. "I would like to see brown-outs avoided."

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SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
OCT. 10, 2006

# Sharing cities look at long-term fire service plan

**By Todd R. Brown**  
STAFF WRITER

SAN BRUNO — Sharing is caring. That simple sentiment is the impetus for a pilot program between the Millbrae and San Bruno fire departments that officials say is working well for residents of both cities.

The 15-month-old program to consolidate battalion chiefs and to share truck company operations means a little extra cash for San Bruno and more initial responders for single-alarm fires and auto accidents in Millbrae.

It's been so efficient that the

San Bruno City Council is looking to formalize the relationship through 2008.

"Prior to this pilot program, Millbrae did not have a truck company respond to their jurisdiction. It's an added level of service for their community," San Bruno Fire Chief Dan Voreyer said.

Before the program, Millbrae Fire Chief Dennis Haag said only engine companies could respond to a fire or to traffic accidents, according to a 1999 fire service plan. Today, a truck company bearing the Jaws of Life and other extrication equip-

ment can be deployed early to calls for help.

Engine and truck companies consist of three-person teams, Voreyer said. As for battalion chiefs, Millbrae has three and San Bruno has one, although one of Millbrae's is assigned to a regional training program, Voreyer said.

That leaves three battalion chiefs, who alternate days, to manage emergency responses by two fire stations in each city, while at the same time giving both of them a firefighting force comparable to San Mateo or South San Francisco, Voreyer

said.

"The program to date has worked very well for emergency responses," he said. "We've had a number of tests on that, including greater-alarm fires and what we call multi-casualty vehicle accidents."

He said the most recent incident was a two-alarm blaze in a Highland Drive home in July that claimed two lives; a Millbrae battalion chief was the first one on the scene.

Voreyer said there have been talks of merging some of the cities' fire operations for years, even before the budget down-

turns caused by the dot-com bust and 9/11.

But the discussion on how to preserve joint fire stations has been nowhere near as arduous as the one between Belmont and San Carlos. By contrast, San Bruno and Millbrae fire officials talked early and often to smooth out the rough spots.

"Both agencies have met on a regular basis to understand the coordination of operations," San Bruno City Manager Connie Jackson said. "It's worked out very well."

Voreyer agreed, adding: "We've had the support of labor in both cities. It's been very positive in that way."

The recent retirement of two of San Bruno's battalion chiefs dovetailed with the sharing pro-

gram. The City Council will consider formalizing with Millbrae through June 30, 2008, at its meeting tonight at 7 in the San Bruno Senior Center, 1555 Crystal Springs Road.

A battalion chief earns between \$7,547 and \$9,261 monthly, Jackson said, saving the city a fair bit of change.

Millbrae's fire department has a \$4.1 million budget, Haag said; San Bruno's has a \$6.7 million budget, according to Voreyer.

"We're going to keep looking at ways to do business better," he said. "We're doing it for less money (and) it's well within accepted standards and practices for the fire services in the county."

(CONT.)

said.

Half an hour and a reset alarm panel later, they went back to bed, turnouts readied for the next call — but holding an unspoken hope that it wouldn't come until daylight.

"Getting woken up at 3 o'clock in the morning, they've done studies, it jolts you. It shortens your life span," said Way, 38, a 16-year veteran. "I'm going from dead sleep to instant adrenaline, right now. I mean, I'm sound asleep, and in four minutes, I'm on the freeway extricating somebody out of a car."

### 'This is our baby'

Way's livelihood has been thrust into the limelight in San Carlos and Belmont, after the department, formerly called the South County Fire Authority, faced bankruptcy and dissolution two years ago. Instead, elected officials made a last-ditch effort to save it, giving it a new name and a new joint-powers agreement. Property owners have until mid-November to vote on an assessment that would raise \$2.4 million annually for staffing, equipment replacements, retiree medical costs and building back the operating reserve.

Through two years of uncertainty, the firefighters have been determined to save their department, sometimes to extents that seem illogical. Many don't even live in the county, but they have canvassed neighborhoods on their days off in recent weeks to champion the assessment. They made unprecedented concessions in their new five-year labor contract, including a two-year salary freeze and a less-generous pension for new hires.

All of it begs the question: Why go to such great lengths to preserve this department?

Spend a 24-hour shift with two firefighters and a captain at Station 14 on Granada Street, and the extent of their affection for it becomes clear.

"It's our fire department. I've been here for 23 years," said acting Battalion Chief Gary Fauth. "This is our baby."

### The 'fifth fire station'

Extensive equipment checks happen the first and third Mondays of the month. Last Monday, firefighter and paramedic Gary Jacobs, 38, tested all the truck's medical equipment, like tracheal intubation kits, needles to start IV lines, and a portable electrocardiogram machine. Firefighters, not ambulances, are the first responders to 9-1-1 medical calls.

Way took the truck out of the garage to extend its outriggers, which stabilize it before sending its 110-foot ladder toward the sky. All went fine until Way and Jacobs tried to get the outriggers back inside the truck: they were stuck.

The truck was taken out of service, leaving the job of answering a call in their jurisdiction to another station farther away.

"This is why we need new equipment," Jacobs said.

This was just the station's back-up truck, which they share with Central County Fire. Their 8-year-old front-line truck, a \$750,000 piece of equipment that weighs 65,000 pounds, has a broken axle housing and has been at Bus & Equipment Repair of California on nearby Karen Road — which they affectionately call their "fifth fire station" — for a month.

Frontline Truck 14 is in good company — one of the department's engines was also at Bus & Equipment last week for siren and light repair, and another engine was in South San Francisco having its transmission replaced.

Later in the day, Engine 15 was also taken out of service when its cab got stuck in the upright position. That left Station 14 to run nearly all of the medical calls in the city.

The assessment will help fund equipment replacement, which the firefighters say will become imperative in the not-so-distant future.

"We have equipment that's failing and falling into lesser repair because of age. We need to get that stuff replaced," said Jacobs, who has been with the department for seven years and commutes from Davis. "Ninety-five percent reliable is not going to carry any weight with somebody who's having a heart attack. We need to be there 100 percent of the time."

### Downtime secrets

Emergencies can happen in rapid succession or leave long lulls of tranquility.

There was a call to an apartment building at 1700 San Carlos Ave. for a lint fire in a dryer and then to Safeway on El Camino Real for sparking electrical wires outside. A hazardous materials call — the department provides the service under contract to the entire county — made an elaborately cooked dinner an exercise in shoveling.

But the afternoon left time for the less-glamorous firehouse duties, like laundry and bathroom cleaning. There is no maid here, something that the firefighters feel that residents don't always understand.

"The house still has to get cleaned," said Capt. Chuck Lax, 36, who has been with the department since 1995.

Shopping at Safeway for lunch and dinner was a display of good-natured bickering over who owes whom — the firefighters pay for all their own meals. They also pay for their televisions, cable, newspapers, uniform dry cleaning, condiments and coffee.

Jacobs, Way and Lax know they could have easily left their troubled department behind and gone elsewhere. But Station 14 is where they want to spend their 10 24-hour shifts a month.

"We have a good enough thing here, in our working conditions and what we do, that it was worth fighting for," Jacobs said. "The citizens, they deserve it."

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# Officials see no solution if fire taxes fail

By Christine Morente  
STAFF WRITER

SAN CARLOS — Sitting in front of Starbuck's and sipping their morning coffee, San Carlos Mayor Matt Grocott and Belmont-San Carlos fire Chief Doug Fry said there is no alternative plan if the fire assessments fail in November.

At most, there would be at least three more years of continued joint fire services, Grocott said.

"It would be a struggle, definitely," he said recently.

Belmont and San Carlos property owners recently were mailed ballots on whether to tax themselves to raise \$2.26 million a year for 15 years to fund a retooled South County Fire Authority, now known as the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department.

"If it doesn't pass, I don't know what we're going to do," said Belmont Vice Mayor Coralin Feierbach. "Closing stations maybe, browning out stations. These are questions we have to face if it doesn't pass. If fire protection and police pro-

tection are the most important things to people, then they should vote for it. If it's not, they shouldn't. It's whatever they consider important."

If the taxes are passed, the average Belmont homeowner would pay \$93 a year per property. In San Carlos, the average homeowner would pay \$99 a year per property. Commercial businesses in both cities will be assessed based on the property's square footage. A simple majority is needed to pass the assessments.

Property owners of single-family homes would pay 65 percent of the assessment's value. City officials are counting on their support to pay for a cross-staffed ladder truck and fire engine service, firefighting personnel, and a fund to replace fire protection vehicles and

equipment for each city.

Grocott considers the taxes to be "the last piece of the puzzle" to the work fire board officials have been focusing on since January.

If the tax fails in only one city, it doesn't mean the end of joint fire service, Fry said. While some voters might reject the tax because they want their own fire agency, Fry said that idea most likely isn't feasible.

There are retiree health care, pensions and other unfunded liabilities that other departments won't want to absorb, which would make it difficult if San Carlos or Belmont want to merge with another fire agency.

"The (Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department) is the best deal," Fry said. "We have a plan to pay off unfunded liabilities, and it would take 13 years to pay that down. Another city is not necessarily going to take on

additional debt."

Belmont and San Carlos have shared services since 1979, first as the South County Fire Protection Authority. Increases in personnel, labor and maintenance costs forced the two city councils to ask for a parcel tax in 2003. Measure I would have raised \$2.3 million for the authority, but voters rejected it.

In December 2005, Belmont opted out of the authority. This year, the authority dissolved but was reborn as the Belmont-San Carlos Fire District with a new joint-powers agreement.

For now, the fire department has two vacancies, but by mid-November, Fry expects to have seven vacant positions because of promotions. If the assessments fail, he said he doesn't anticipate laying off firefighters.

So far 300 ballots have been turned in to the Belmont City Clerk's office, and more than

3,000 to the San Carlos' City Clerk's office.

"If it doesn't pass, I don't know what we're going to do," said Belmont Vice Mayor Coralin Feierbach. "Closing stations maybe, browning out stations. These are questions we have to face if it doesn't pass. If fire protection and police protection are the most important things to people, then they should vote for it. If it's not, they shouldn't. It's whatever they consider important."

Ballots must be returned to the City Clerk's office of the property owner's respective city hall by Nov. 13 in San Carlos, and Nov. 14 for Belmont. Ballots will be counted and results will be announced at the end of the week.

# Affection runs deep for beleaguered department

By Rebekah Gordon

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — While the rest of the city lay quiet and most residents were asleep at 12:20 a.m. last Tuesday, they had to get up.

Not, however, in a stumble-through-the-darkness-to-use-the-bathroom-and-crawl-back-to-bed sort of way. No — this was a run-down-the-stairs-in-whatever-you're-wearing sort of way.

One minute from slumber, their turnouts were on, lights were flashing, and Truck 14 was out the door onto Ralston Avenue and headed to Notre Dame de Namur

University.

Just a month into the school year, pajama-clad undergraduates huddled outside of New Hall dorm. The fire alarm sounded, strobe lights flashed and the truck, three engines and a battalion chief — Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department's entire front line — arrived.

The culprit for this emergency assemblage? Popcorn, left too long in the microwave.

"Start of every year — what else is new?" firefighter Mark Way

Please see **FIRE**, Local 2



(CONT.)

DEPI.  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
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# Fire agency struggles for its existence



MATHEW SUMNER — Staff photos

**IT'S BUSINESS** as usual for the men and women of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Authority, which has embarked on a campaign for an assessment to save their agency. Capt. Chuck Lax (above) tests a breathing apparatus at fire station 14 in Belmont. Lax (below, right) and firefighter Mark Way practice cutting holes in the roof of Belmont's old police station, which is set for demolition. Fire crews' boots and turnouts lie in wait for the next fire emergency.

(OVER)

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OCT. 14-15, 2006

# High priorities in hazard plan go unfunded

County firefighters struggling with increased needs and service cuts; supes consider imposing brownouts

By Edward Carpenter  
Staff Writer

REDWOOD CITY — Increased spending on new radios, patrols in high fire risk weather and on public education for natural disasters were identified as high priorities for county firefighters in a new report on disaster preparedness.

At the same time, however, the county's fire agency is weighing service cuts in the coming year. A subcommittee of the Board of Supervisors, including Mark Church and Rich Gordon, will meet at the end of the month to begin weighing possible brownouts — closing a station for a number of hours or days during the week to save money — as well as increasing revenue through new taxes, Deputy County Manager Reyna Farrales said.

The apparent tug-of-war between identified needs and reality is the result of an ongoing budget shortfall that has forced the Board of Supervisors to subsidize the county fire fund to the tune of nearly \$1 million in the past two years. So far, tightening the belt hasn't meant

a loss of frontline firefighting position, but San Mateo County Fire has moved to consolidate some administrative posts, according to John Ferreira, chief of the California Department of Forestry firefighters and San Mateo County Fire.

"We have had to change the way we do some operations, including partnering with other fire agencies to share training officers and so on," Ferreira said.

The report, the Local Hazard Mitigation Plan for unincorporated San Mateo County, is required by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to receive grants funds in both pre- and post-disaster situations. It notes that new radios would allow county firefighters to communicate with police and public works officials in the event of an emergency, Ferreira said.

Increased patrols during dry, windy weather could mean spotting a fire before it grows uncontrollable. And teaching the public to clear land of flammable brush and elevate electronics during high water could help prevent fires and keep them from spreading.

Without more money, it's unlikely these things we be accomplished anytime soon, officials said.

"Basically our funding has been reduced and they're expecting more out of us," said county fire Battalion Chief Scott Jalbert, who is based at the Belmont Station on Tower Road in San Mateo.

Board of Supervisors President Jerry Hill acknowledged that flat revenues in the face of

*"Basically, our funding has been reduced and they're expecting more out of us."* — **Scott Jalbert**, San Mateo County fire battalion chief

increased fire service costs are a concern, but said the agency hasn't reached a breaking point yet.

"The top priority is guaranteeing the public safety," he said.

The good news is that if FEMA accepts the Hazard Mitigation Plan, the county can compete for grants to help pay for new radios, patrols and public outreach, Farrales said.

In addition to station brownouts, supervisors will consider raising money for county fire services through parking lot fees at and around the airport and taxi and limousine service charges, both of which would require voter approval, Farrales said.

Much of the fire agency's budget shortfall is a result of flat gains in sales and property tax proceeds from businesses in and around the airport, where the county fire fund garners its revenue. Earlier this year, the county was forced to return \$9.8 million in property taxes to airlines following a reassessment of unsecure property, mainly airplanes, which dropped in value after Sept. 11, 2001, Farrales said.

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## IN REMEMBRANCE



JOHN GREEN — Staff

**KATHLEEN REHM** gives Captain Art Anderson a hug after presenting the Belmont and San Carlos Firefighters Association with a \$10,000 check. Rehm gave the firefighters the check in honor of her parents, the late Emil and Mary Ellen Rehm.

# Cities await results of fire vote

■ Tax would go to Belmont and San Carlos departments

By Christine Morente

STAFF WRITER

Bins filled with Belmont-San Carlos fire assessment ballots will be pried open and counted this week, the culmination of an emotional roller-coaster for city officials who have worked since January to sustain the Fire Department for the next 15 years.

Belmont-San Carlos Fire Chief Doug Fry has been anticipating the event for

the last couple of weeks.

"There have been sleepless nights," Fry said. "(But) people are now enlightened to what the department's needs are."

If property owners for both cities approve the tax, the average Belmont homeowner would pay \$93 a year per property. In San Carlos, \$99 would be billed to homeowners. Combined, the taxes would raise \$2.26 million a year. Commercial businesses in both cities will be assessed based on a property's square footage.

So far, about 4,500 ballots have been turned in to the Belmont City Clerk's office, while about 5,000 have been mailed or handed over in San Carlos. There are about 20,000 parcels between the two cities.

Monday night, the San Carlos City Council will hold a public hearing. It will be the last chance to turn in ballots. On Tuesday, the Belmont City Council will have its public hearing and ballots will also be accepted until the end of the meeting.

A simple majority is needed to pass

the assessments. Property owners of single-family homes would pay 65 percent of the assessment's value.

San Carlos resident Wendy Goeking voted as soon as she got her ballot in the mail.

"I want to keep our fire service at the acceptable level," she said. "I don't like the idea of not having services available, and I'd rather pay to have one."

Goeking walked the precincts for Measure I — a \$2.3 million-a-year parcel tax in 2003 — which failed. This

time, she said she isn't sure what the outcome will be for the mail-in ballot assessments. People went to the polls to cast their votes for Measure I.

"It's really hard to get a sense for it," said Goeking, who lives on Inverness Drive. "I think with this (current) way, more people will ignore it because it's not foremost in their thought process. I'm worried it will go by the wayside."

Fry, who was promoted to fire chief three months ago, said it's a different fire department now.

## If both assessments pass, they would pay for a cross-staffed ladder truck and fire engine service, firefighting personnel, and a fund to replace fire vehicles and equipment.

"The mood of the guys, the morale, everything has turned around," he said. "It's a positive organization now."

Promotions are also afoot, Fry added. Tests for battalion chief positions were completed last Monday, and the fire captain assessment was done

Thursday.

"We're willing to work and keep it (the department) together," he said.

If both assessments pass, they would pay for a cross-staffed ladder truck and fire engine service, firefighting per-

sonnel, and a fund to replace fire vehicles and equipment.

Preliminary results of both assessments will be available at the end of the week.

The San Carlos City Council meeting is at 7 p.m., Monday at City Hall, 600 Elm St. The Belmont City Council meeting is at 7:30 p.m., Tuesday at City Hall, One Twin Pines Lane.

(OVER)

# Voters reject funds for Fire Department

Property owners turn down two assessments on ballot meant to raise \$2.5 million

By Beth Winegarner  
Staff Writer

**SAN CARLOS** — City officials and firefighters were reeling Wednesday at the news that voters rejected two assessments aimed at raising \$2.5 million for the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department.

In San Carlos, property owners gave that city's assessment a 53 percent "no" vote, while those in Belmont gave it a 59 percent "no."

In pure ballot numbers, more voters in each city favored the assessment, but the ballots were weighted by the voter's assessed property value — meaning those with more land, or those living in

## RESULTS OF THE ASSESSMENT VOTE

	Yes*	No*	Total ballots mailed	Total ballots returned
<b>San Carlos</b>	47%	53%	10,965	5112 (47%)
<b>Belmont</b>	41%	59%	8,346	3427 (41%)

\* All votes weighted

multi-unit buildings rejected the tax and decided the outcome, according to Belmont City Clerk Terri Cook.

Although officials in both cities expected the vote to be close, they said they had hoped more votes would swing in favor of the assessment.

"I'm very disappointed with the property owners," said Belmont Vice Mayor Coraline Feierbach, who also sits on the Fire Department's board. "They don't know how important fire protection is until they need it. We could have another Oakland fire — what are people going to do?"

The results echoed voters' rejection of Measure I, a 2003 property tax that would have raised \$3 mil-

lion for the Fire Department, then known as the South County Fire Protection Authority.

The joint Fire Department, shared by the two cities since 1979, was destined for a breakup due to financial problems and political conflicts until early this year, when city officials on the fire board halted the split and moved to reorganize instead. The agency board considered hiring another city or the California Department of Forestry to perform fire services for Belmont and San Carlos, but board members vetoed that plan, too, and opted to ask voters for a dedicated assessment instead.

Initially, board members said they

would keep the Fire Department together only if voters approved the property assessment. Now, it's up to those officials to determine the future of the joint agency.

"My first alternative is not going to be to throw away this fire department or to go outside for contracting," said San Carlos Mayor Matt Grocott, a Fire Department board member. "We will look again to see if there's any [fiscal] efficiencies that we can find."

Station brownouts and staffing shortages, already a reality for the cash-poor agency, will likely be part of the department's future, Grocott added.

"We were very optimistic," said Gary Fauth, representative for the South County Firefighters Association. "We've done so much work, and there are so many reasons to say, 'This isn't great, but where do we go from here?' We'll be able to work through this."

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(OVER)

people. They consider the homeowners' property a bottomless teller machine."

San Carlos firefighter Shawn Wilkerson of Station 16 said he was disappointed, but had no hard feelings toward the citizens.

"The people have spoken in that they don't want any more taxes," he said. "It's not a direct reflection at all on the fire department. We are going to continue being Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department. We're moving forward, and we'll get past this."

The Belmont-San Carlos Fire Board Commission is expected to find a Plan B to maintain the fire department in December. If both assessments had passed, they would have raised a combined \$2.26 million a year for the next 15 years.

Grocott said he doesn't foresee laying off firefighters, but that a fire station might have to close for a day if someone doesn't come in to work. There would also be three open positions, because of promotions, that may not be filled.

"The guys are burned out on overtime," Grocott said.

He also doesn't plan to court the San Mateo Fire Department or the state's forestry department to share services.

"There's a tremendous amount of loyalty with the firefighters," Grocott said. "We are not ready to put the department on the trash heap."

On the other hand, Belmont Councilman Dave Warden said there is a clause in the new joint powers agreement that gives Belmont an option to abandon the partnership at the end of the year.

"There's no good solution, there's no silver lining to this," he said. "If we are to

keep the fire department together, we have to agree on something that Belmont and San Carlos can see eye-to-eye on. Limping along year by year is not appropriate."

In the last few years, increases in personnel, labor and maintenance costs have forced the two city councils to ask residents for financial help. A failed 2003 parcel tax would have raised \$2.3 million a year for what was then called the South County Fire Protection Authority.

Kathy Lynch, of San Carlos, was surprised the assessment failed, especially in an area where it's difficult to gain access to certain streets or put out fires on the hillsides.

"We have to pay for these services, and it's just too bad that citizens don't realize that," she said. "Maybe when one of their houses burns, they'll change their mind."

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SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
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# Joint measure looks to be failing

■ San Carlos, Belmont homeowners vote against fire district assessment

**By Christine Morente**  
STAFF WRITER

SAN CARLOS — Attempts to sustain the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department appeared futile Wednesday after the majority of property owners in both cities heartily rejected the fire assessment.

San Carlos Mayor Matt Grocott said he wasn't surprised of the close call of early tallies, after a number of tax measures failed this past election.

"We're all on the same boat, and voters were sending a message to us in government that (they) pay enough in taxes al-

.....  
"The fee was not the problem. The problem is the politician. They don't listen, and they don't represent the majority of the people."  
.....

**Leo Calhoun**  
SAN CARLOS RESIDENT

.....  
ready," he said. "This was simply the last piece of the puzzle. We did a lot of work to get a new fire department. Maybe we looked in the wrong place for the last piece of puzzle."

By Wednesday afternoon, early results in San Carlos showed that a weighted vote of 53 percent opposed the \$99 a year tax. Votes are weighted based on the assessed value of each property. The City Council is expected to pass a resolution accepting the vote on Nov. 27.

Also on Wednesday, Belmont's results showed 59 percent saying "no" to the \$93 annual assessment after a day of counting. Its City Council is also expected to pass a resolution accepting the tally on Nov. 28.

San Carlos resident Leo Calhoun said he is pleased that the assessment failed.

"I was prepared to initiate a recall election," he said. "The fee was not the problem. The problem is the politician. They don't listen, and they don't represent the majority of the

OVER

FIRE DEPT.  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
NOV. 14, 2006

# Department optimistic about assessment

Votes are still coming in, but firefighters confident it'll pass

By Beth Winegarner  
Staff Writer

**BELMONT** — The mail-in ballots are piling up in Belmont and San Carlos, where both cities are preparing to count the votes that will spell the future of their joint fire department.

Property owners in both cities are voting on an assessment designed to raise a total of \$2.5 million in support of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department, the new name for the cities' 25-year-old joint fire department, formerly the South County Fire Authority. Officials voted to spare the department from dissolution early this year, on the condition that they get an assessment passed.

"It's going to be a nail-biter," Belmont City Council member Dave Warden said. "I think it's going to be close."

More than 19,000 ballots were mailed in late September — more than 8,000 in Belmont and nearly 11,000 in San Carlos. San Carlos property owners have mailed back some 5,000, while Belmont's have returned between 4,000 and 5,000. City Clerks in both cities expect plenty more to come in between now and the voting deadline early next week.

In 2003, voters failed to pass Measure I, a tax measure designed

to raise \$3.2 million for the fire department. Since then, the department has laid off six firefighters, struggled financially and "browned out" stations when staffing levels dropped. While Measure I required two-thirds approval to pass, the assessment needs a simple majority.

If voters approve the assessment, the department will be able to hire six new firefighters, in addition to the six it hired in early 2006, Fire Chief Doug Fry said. Morale is good and firefighters are optimistic about the assessment vote's outcome, he said. No one has discussed what the department will do if it doesn't pass.

"We wanted to stay upbeat. We really didn't want to go there," Fry said.

Belmont and Carlos have encountered only minor snags in the 45-day all-mail election. Approximately 300 townhome owners, 200 in San Carlos and 100 in Belmont, protested after their ballots designated them owners of single-family homes.

"They were making an issue of it, even though they recognized it was just a \$20-a-year difference," Belmont City Clerk Terri Cook said.

San Carlos's voting deadline is Monday; Belmont's is Tuesday. San Carlos expects to be finished counting ballots on Wednesday, according to City Clerk Christine Boland. Belmont's votes should be counted by Thursday, Cook said.

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed," San Carlos Mayor Matt Grocott said.

*bwinegarner@examiner.com*

## Few fight fire tax; ballot counting starts

By Dana Yates

DAILY JOURNAL STAFF

The financial fate of the cash-poor Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department is locked up in approximately 10,000 ballots sitting in two city clerks' offices in both cities.

Today, approximately 6,000 of those ballots will begin to be carefully unsealed and counted. Each will help determine if the fire department can collect nearly \$100 a year for each residential property to fund new fire equipment, keep fire stations open and maintain current fire equipment.

The all-mail ballot needs 50 percent of the vote but Proposition 218 requires a public protest hearing for anyone disputing the new tax. Only a handful of residents took the city up on that opportunity at last night's San Carlos City Council meeting.

One man expressed concern over the fact that assessment ballots are not kept secret. Ballots are available for review after they are counted

this week. Legally anyone can view those ballots, but Mayor Matt Grocott contended that the likelihood of anyone viewing the ballots is slim.

"The fire engines and the fire trucks are not going to have a list of properties and will not respond to you based on how you responded [to the ballot]," Grocott said.

City Attorney Joan Cassman was present to answer any questions about the unusual mail-in ballot. However, at least two speakers suggested that anyone who has questions should try attending a board fire board meeting.

"... They are public meetings, they are agendized. Anyone can come. Nobody does. Those of us that went know how much this is needed and how much has been done to make this [department] lean and mean," said San Carlos resident Pat Bell.

Brian Reynolds, another regular fire board attendee, put the tax in perspective for residents.

"It'll cost me \$1.90 a week," Reynolds said. "Never mind about my house being the first thing. Life is the first thing — \$1.90, I'll pay three times that much to have a paramedic show up on the first response."

San Carlos is proposing a \$99-a-year tax for each residential property. The amount is higher for commercial and high-density housing. Belmont is proposing a \$93-a-year tax with similar increases for larger properties. The proposed tax would raise \$2.3 million, enough to keep the department afloat and prepare for the future.

All but one council member was present. Councilwoman Inge Tiegel Doherty was notably absent during what might be one of the council's most publicized meetings of the year.

Tiegel-Doherty was on vacation, City Clerk Christine Boland said.

Tonight's Belmont protest hearing is 7:30 p.m. at City Hall, 1 Twin Pines Lane, Belmont.

# Concerns about ballot process fuel fire vote

BY WILL OREMUS  
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Everyone agrees that fire protection is important. But as voting closed in San Carlos on the city's fire assessment Monday night, a public hearing made it clear that not everyone agrees on how to fund it.

While some residents are concerned about the amount of the tax and what it will be used for, many say it's not about the money — it's about the process.

The assessment would bring in an estimated \$1.27 million per year over the next 15 years to buy equipment and boost reserves for the

newly christened Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department. Some supporters say it's critical to the survival of the joint department, which nearly dissolved last year amid financial squabbles.

But with the vote count in San Carlos beginning this morning, and the last ballots in Belmont being cast at a City Council meeting tonight, it's not at all clear the measure will pass.

Belmont resident Stuart Hoffman took a trip to City Hall to express his reservations Monday.

"My primary concern here is the lack of privacy," Hoffman said. Vot-

ers must sign their names on the ballots, and the information may be available to the public for a year or more after the election.

"They're probably going to put them in some kind of database, and who's going to have access to that?" Hoffman said. "It would be a rather draconian measure, but think about the fact that a firefighter could, if (the assessment) failed, look and see 'Hey, that whole street voted against it.'"

City and fire officials at the San Carlos meeting Monday assured residents that would never happen. "We are certainly not going to be

making a list of who voted how," Fire Chief Doug Fry said.

Sharon Boome of San Carlos had a different concern. "I'd like to ask that in the future, the retirement plans and benefits of some of our public employees be looked at," she said. "I wonder if we could put some of that money toward the fire trucks."

If the assessment passes, about 20 percent of the money will go toward retiree medical program costs — the second-largest chunk of funding behind staffing costs.

Not everyone who spoke at the hearing was against the assessment.

San Carlos resident Brian Randall called the local fire department "the best this side of New York City," and said he'd be willing to pay three times the amount asked to ensure it was properly equipped and staffed.

Fellow supporter Pat Bell said after the meeting, "I have no feel whether this is going to pass or not. You can't tell by this crowd."

A similar public hearing will take place at tonight's Belmont City Council meeting. The votes are expected to be tallied by the end of this week.

*E-mail Will Oremus at [woremus@dailynewsgroup.com](mailto:woremus@dailynewsgroup.com).*

# Fire assessment burned in forums

■ Belmont, San Carlos hold public hearings on proposed tax for department funding

By Christine Morente  
STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — If public hearings in Belmont and San Carlos over the past two days are any indication, the outlook for the fire assessment looks grim.

Criticisms of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Assessment were nearly identical during two public hearings, causing both City Councils to fiercely

defend the two taxes proposed to sustain the Fire Department for the next 15 years.

On Monday, the San Carlos City Council heard arguments about the necessity of its \$99 fire assessment, while Tuesday night, about a handful of property owners questioned the Belmont City Council and its staff on the \$93 assessment.

Residents in both forums expressed concerns over the fact that the ballot was not cast anonymously, fearful that anyone could see how they voted. They also were worried that the cities would

mismanage the money.

Henry Gold, a Belmont resident, said he is upset that the city wasn't up front with how the money was going to be used. He voted "no."

Nowhere in the ballot does it tell the public that half of the cost of the assessment is going to fund (a fire-fighter's) retirement plan," Gold said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be here. Half of the people here wouldn't be here."

Tuesday night was the deadline to turn in mail-in ballots for Belmont, while it was Monday night for San Carlos.

Muni-Financial, a San Francisco firm, started counting ballots Tuesday morning in San Carlos. Preliminary results for that city could be available today. The firm also began tallying Belmont's ballots this morning, with results available Thursday.

If both assessments pass, the taxes would raise a combined \$2.26 million a year, for 15 years. Commercial businesses in both cities will be assessed based on a property's square footage.

A simple majority is needed to pass

the assessments. Property owners of single-family homes would pay 65 percent of the assessment's value.

Belmont Councilman Dave Warden, who is also on the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department Commission, said he respects that people want to vote "no" on the assessment. But he argued that the two city's general funds are the depart-

ments only financing.

"The fact is, we don't have any money," Warden said. "The fact is, we have accumulated a lot of debt. We're trying to do everything we can to keep costs down. But I'm proud of our fire department and I hope our fire assessment passes."

Both meetings weren't devoid of supporters. Kathy Lynch of San Carlos said she wasn't willing to lose her home to a

fire, while Sheila Cockshott of Belmont said she wants to pay for her safety.

"This is an issue of the common good," Cockshott said. "I don't think people should adopt the attitude of (needing the fire department) won't happen to them."

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FIKE DEPT.  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
NOV. 26, 2006

# City considers options after assessment's flop

■ Uncertain future of fire department leaves council to decide whether to stay a joint partnership with Belmont

**By Christine Morente**

STAFF WRITER

SAN CARLOS — Faced with a fire department with an uncertain future, the City Council will discuss options on Monday that range from staying committed to the joint powers agreement

with Belmont, or breaking up at the end of the year and finding another partner.

At the moment, staff's recommendation is to stay with the agreement, said Assistant City Manager Brian Moura.

"San Carlos does not have an interest in starting its own department," he said. "The JPA is its top priority. Obviously everyone would have liked to have more money and hire additional firefighters, but since it's not to be, we have to make do with what we have and do the best job we can."

The recent failure of the fire assessment has sent city officials scrambling for an alternate plan.

Results in San Carlos showed 53 percent opposition to the \$99-a-year tax. Votes were weighted, based on the assessed value of a voter's property. The City Council is expected to pass a resolution accepting the vote at Monday's meeting.

In Belmont, results showed a 59 percent opposition level to that city's proposed \$93 annual assessment. If both assessments had passed, they

would have raised a combined \$2.26 million a year for the next 15 years.

There is a clause in the new joint powers agreement that gives Belmont an option to abandon the partnership at the end of the year.

Moura said the department will be working on a baseline budget to keep things status quo for now.

In 2005, both San Carlos and Belmont kicked in \$4.8 million from the general fund, and in 2006, added an-

other \$5.3 million each to the budget.

Moura adds that the council can decide to terminate the relationship by the end of the year, effective June 30, 2007, or wait after Jan. 1 and dissolve the JPA in 18 months. So far, the San Mateo Fire Department or the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection have not stepped up with proposals, he said.

"If we wish to talk in the future, we could," Moura said. "That's just to show the council that it does have some options."

But whatever proposals come from staff, San Carlos Mayor Matt Grocott said he wants to keep the fire department whole, and hear different ideas on how to augment the amount

of money going into the agency. Contracting with a different city or the state would be bad news.

"We would destroy the Fire Department," Grocott said. "We've done enough for the Fire Department in terms of creating efficiencies. We need to let these guys alone for awhile and look at other areas to save money."

Other agenda items include mayoral and vice mayor rotation, and development agreement discussions with the Palo Alto Medical Foundation.

The meeting is at 7 p.m. at City Hall, 600 Elm St.

FIRE DEPT.  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
NOV. 30, 2006

# Fire board set to keep department

By Christine Morente

STAFF WRITER

SAN CARLOS — Keeping the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department afloat would need another assessment election, according to its fire board Wednesday night.

Board members decided to go back to their respective city councils and discuss amending the escape clause in the joint powers agreement that created the department, extending the deadline for a pullout vote to June 30, 2007. That would give the cities time to come up with a long-term plan to save the department.

"Bottom line, we stay together," said San Carlos Councilman Bob Grassilli. "Together, we're stronger."

The special meeting was called to address the failure of recent fire assessment measures in both cities and to look at options for department's survival.

Fire Chief Doug Fry talked about doubling or even tripling false-alarm and permit fees, and collecting inspection fees for apartments and businesses.

He added that if the California Department of Forestry

decides to close or "brown out" Station 18, which covers the unincorporated Palomar Park area outside San Carlos, the joint fire department could sell its services to the state.

But much of the debate was over San Carlos Councilman Matt Grocott's suggestion to revisit the proposed funding formula before looking at another assessment.

If the assessments had passed, Belmont would have paid 47 percent of the department's budget and San Carlos 53 percent, based on the cities'

sizes. Passage would have raised a combined \$2.26 million a year for the next 15 years.

Grocott also called for a budget incorporating the unfunded liabilities for each city and to start paying them off.

If the business owners of San Carlos don't like the 47-53 formula, then maybe the two cities should go their own way, said Belmont Mayor Coralin Feierbach.

"We did our damndest best," she said. "Maybe San Carlos needs to be by itself. I want to protect the fire department just as anybody else. Police and fire are two of the most

important issues we have in the cities."

Feierbach suggested that San Carlos approve Palo Alto Medical Foundation's project to build a hospital and medical office building, and get new funding for the fire district.

The foundation has proposed providing \$1.5 million for the San Carlos Education Foundation, and \$1 million for the city's parks foundation to improve athletic facilities and fields.

"PAMF should give you a lot of money," she said.

The board meets again Dec. 13.

EXAMINER-INDEPENDENT;  
DEC. 2-3, 2006

# Property owners sink tax for Fire Department

**Belmont-San Carlos officials say they will face \$18M deficit**

**By Beth Winegarner**  
Staff Writer

**BELMONT** — Officials with the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department are staring down the barrel of \$18 million in future debt and a stack of ballots that show local property owners don't want to pay for it.

Homeowners in both cities — who would have paid \$93 a year in Belmont and \$99 in San Carlos — predominantly voted in favor of a tax assessment proposed this fall. But their votes weren't enough to outweigh commercial property owners who hold more land and would have paid anywhere from \$322 to \$1,000 or more if the assessment passed this month.

"[Belmont] received nearly 60 percent overall support, but when weighted, we only mustered 41 percent," said Thomas Fil, the city's finance director. "The difference was those large assessments on businesses and apartment buildings, and that's something that needs to be revisited if there's another [tax measure]."

In San Carlos, dozens of property owners along Laurel Street or El Camino Real — the city's retail hub — voted no to an annual \$322.32 tax hike. Sheryl Pomerenk, executive director of the San Carlos Chamber of Commerce, said her agency hasn't discussed the vote with its

members yet but would likely do so during a meeting of its government affairs committee Friday.

Some voters left notes on their ballots indicating why they voted the way they did, ranging from the realities of life on a fixed income to a perception that firefighters are "fat cats who are just getting benefits with rare firefighting."

Others offered cost-saving suggestions: "Seek a contract with CDF and San Mateo fire — save money and consolidate," one San Carlos voter wrote. "Cut city expenses, not raise taxes," wrote another in Belmont.

While the joint fire agency is in good shape through June 30, 2007 with a balanced budget of roughly \$10.5 million, the looming cost of retiree medical benefits — coupled with the need to establish a reserve fund — will in coming years push its budget well beyond what Belmont and San Carlos can afford. Belmont and San Carlos examined the election results in separate meetings this week, while the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department board will meet tonight to study next steps.

"We want to discuss options available to us for funding the fire department, such as changing the fee schedule," Fire Chief Doug Fry said. He also wants to study ways to make the department more efficient, though neither will close the debt.

Belmont and San Carlos each pay \$5.3 million a year to support the Fire Department they've shared since 1976.

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FIRE DEPT.  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIME  
DEC. 7, 2006

# Fire promotions will leave vacancies in the ranks

**By Christine Morente**

STAFF WRITER

Three fire captains with the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department are expected to be promoted to battalion chiefs soon, said Fire Chief Doug Fry.

The three captains — Mike Gaffney, Gary Fauth, and Chet McConville — will be presented to the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Board next Wednesday. All three placed high on the battalion chief and captain promotion exams done in November.

They've been acting as battalion chiefs out of Station 13 on Laurel Street in San Carlos for the last several months.

Once the men are promoted, there will be seven firefighter vacancies, Fry said.

"We're not quite sure what we're going to do about that yet," he said. "I'm really hoping we don't spend gobs of money on overtime. We can only do that for a little while. We don't want to close stations."

Last year, the department has had to "brown out" a San Carlos fire station because of staffing shortages. To prevent temporary closures, eight firefighters were hired at the early part of the summer.

Now, the department is back to where it was before the new hires. Fry said he hopes to

fill some of the positions at the first of the year.

"If everybody stays healthy, I'm in pretty good shape," Fry said.

The department has a balanced budget until June 2007. Its board of commissioners is expected to look at different funding options at its Wednesday meeting. They need to identify funding sources after property owners in Belmont and San Carlos failed to pass separate fire assessments. Both would have raised a combined \$2.26 million a year for the next 15 years.

Tonight, the Belmont City Council, sitting as the Belmont Fire Protection District board, will meet to discuss and possibly amend its joint powers agreement with San Carlos. The board meets at 6:30 p.m., at City Hall's Emergency Operations Center, at One Twin Pines Lane.

"The guys have really, honestly, stepped up to the plate and kept the stations open," Fry said of his fire personnel. "But they have families, too. They didn't come here expecting to work 10 days straight before going home."

Staff writer Christine Morente can be reached at (650) 348-4333 or at [cmorente@sanmateocountytimes.com](mailto:cmorente@sanmateocountytimes.com).

FIRE JUL 11  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
DEC. 8, 2006

# Belmont agrees to extend fire pact

■ New funding formula would take effect July 1

**By Christine Morente**

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — The new Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department may soon have a new lease on life — or at least an extra six months' worth.

Thursday night, the Belmont Fire Protection District board — made up of the city's council — agreed to amend Belmont's part of the joint powers agreement to allow the city to give notice of dissolution of the pact by June 30, with an effective date of Dec. 31, 2007. The current deadline for giving notice is the end of this year.

Additionally, the district board agreed that each city should continue to fund 50 percent of the fire department's budget until July 1. After that, a new funding for-

mula, whereby Belmont pays 47 percent and San Carlos 53 percent would take effect.

"I think 53 percent is a bargain to keep things moving," said Belmont Councilman Dave Warden, who serves on the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Board. He picked up a map that outlined the borders of both cities, showing that San Carlos was the larger city. "I think what we need to do is basically keep the JPA in tact, and go for another assessment."

To which Belmont Mayor Coralin Feierbach responded, "It could pass very easily." For now, they are thinking of setting a parcel tax election in the spring, involving one vote per property, instead of having a weighted vote based on assessed value.

In November, property owners in Belmont and San Carlos failed to pass separate fire assessments which would have raised a combined \$2.26 million a year

for the next 15 years.

If the new tax passes, and Belmont's fire district sees that more money is needed, then fees could be raised.

Council members said they will be watching what the San Carlos City Council decides at its meeting Monday night. San Carlos Councilman Matt Grocott was in attendance at the Belmont meeting Thursday, but did not want to comment on the district board's decision.

The formal resolution amending the joint powers agreement will be brought to the Belmont council at its next meeting Tuesday night.

San Carlos' council meeting is at 7 p.m. Monday at 600 Elm St. Belmont's council meeting is at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at One Twin Pines Lane.

Staff writer Christine Morente can be reached at (650) 348-4333 or at [cmorente@sanmateocountytimes.com](mailto:cmorente@sanmateocountytimes.com).

## Cities' relations cool after fire vote

**By Christine Morente**

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — Council members fought the urge to cut ties from the Belmont-San Carlos Fire District Tuesday night and instead agreed to give San Carlos one more chance to accept a plan that makes the larger city pay 53 percent of the total cost for its fire department.

Councilmen Dave Warden and Phil Mathewson wanted to give notice of dissolution at the meeting after the San Carlos City Council did not agree Monday to pay 53 percent starting July 1.

"I don't think it's acceptable to continue to compromise," said Warden, who serves on the district's fire commission board. "I don't think this business relationship is working. I'm so disappointed, I'm shaking here."

The fire commission board, made up of two San Carlos and two Belmont City Council members, will meet tonight to continue its talk about the partnership. If there is still no agreement from San Carlos, then the Belmont Council will meet Dec. 21 to submit a notice of dissolution.

Both cities have been

working to keep the department whole after property owners in each city turned down an assessment tax that would have raised a combined \$2.26 million a year for 15 years. If the assessments had passed, they would have started a new funding formula with Belmont paying 47 percent.

The formula is based on each city's population, assessed value of properties, and the number of fire calls, stations, companies, and employees in each agency's jurisdiction. Right now, both cities pay equally.

At San Carlos' meeting Monday night, council members declared their willingness to keep working with Belmont, but

also to start talking to San Mateo Fire and the California Department of Forestry in case negotiations fall apart. They did not, however, agree to pay more than what they do under the current 50/50 split with Belmont.

Back in Belmont, Vice Mayor Warren Lieberman said it will take three months to get both cities back on the same page with a formula.

"I believe we're incredibly close," he said. "I think some of it is having a chance to sit down and go through it."

The fire board commission meets at 6:30 p.m. at Belmont City Hall, Room 210, One Twin Pines Lane.

FIRE UNIT  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
DEC. 14, 2006

# Split remains over joint fire funding

**By Christine Morente**

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — Fire commissioners couldn't reach a consensus Wednesday night on how to sustain the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department, so it left it to staff to come up with funding models.

The commission — made up of two Belmont and two San Carlos city council members — will meet again Tuesday at Belmont City Hall.

The impetus to find a solution stems from the Belmont council's unwillingness to re-negotiate a new formula.

It will meet Thursday with the intention of issuing a letter of dissolution if San Carlos doesn't agree to pay 53 percent of the department's budget by July 1, 2007. The formula was agreed on by the two cities on the condition that fire

assessments in both passed in an election last month. They didn't.

Belmont Vice Mayor Warren Lieberman and San Carlos councilmen Matt Grocott and Bob Grassilli agreed Wednesday that letters of dissolution would be a "death knell" to the department.

"It's a bad idea to do that now," Grocott said. "We've learned from past experiences that we cannot afford to sit back. But having a letter hanging over our heads doesn't do us functionally any good."

Meanwhile, Belmont Councilman Phil Mathewson voiced his discontent with continuing talks.

"I'm not convinced at this point," he said. "I'm afraid it will get down to June 30, 2007, and we'll have to have another

six-month delay, and that's not acceptable."

The department's staff will evaluate, among other ideas. Grocott's suggestion to move forward with the funding formula whereby Belmont pays 47 percent and San Carlos 53 percent to raise \$2.26 million. Currently, both cities pay equally.

An alternate suggestion by Grassilli would allow Belmont to pay \$5 million and San Carlos \$5.3 million. Inspection fees, plan-check fees and other revenue would be used to cover the rest of the department's budget, or about \$300,000.

Other funding models will be presented and reviewed at the Tuesday meeting at One Twin Pines Lane.

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FIRE DEPT.  
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES  
DEC. 23, 2006

# Belmont stalls fire pullout vote

■ San Carlos would have to agree to new funding formula

**By Christine Morente**

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — The Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department clung to life Thursday night as Belmont officials agreed to put off pulling out of a joint powers agreement with San Carlos.

But the City Council, sitting as the board of the Belmont Fire Protection District, reserved the right to issue a letter of dissolution anytime up to June 30, if San Carlos refuses to pay a greater share of the fire department's budget starting July 1. Dissolution would be in effect six months after the letter is issued.

The decision to continue with the district was 4-1, with Mayor Coralin Feierbach wanting to sever ties.

"You have six months to negotiate," she said before the vote.

The district did agree unanimously to support a funding formula that allows Belmont to pay 47.4 percent, San Carlos 52.6 percent. That takes into account 2005 call volumes for both cities, according to Vice Mayor Warren Lieberman, who is on the fire commission.

San Carlos Mayor Tom Davids confirmed at the meeting that he and his council will seriously consider the formula based on population, assessed valuation, call volumes, number of parcels, and the number of fire stations. It was one of seven models presented to the fire department's Board of Com-

missioners on Tuesday.

The commission — made up of two council members from both cities — has been working feverishly to keep the department intact after property owners in each city turned down assessments that would have raised a combined \$2.26 million a year for 15 years. If the assessments had passed, a new funding formula would have San Carlos paying 53 percent of the budget and Belmont 47 percent. Today, they pay equally.

A number of people pleaded with the Fire Protection District board to hold off on the dissolution, while others cast San Carlos as the villains of the piece.

Belmont resident Robert Donovan told the district that he doesn't care

which funding model they choose.

"I implore you to please, please, resolve this issue," he said. "It is important that we have a great fire department."

Councilman Dave Warden — who recently stepped down from the fire commission after four years — said Belmont had made plenty of compromises over the years.

He presented a timeline starting with the creation of the joint powers agreement in 1979 as the South County Fire Protection Authority.

Back then, both cities were almost identical in population and land distribution. Warden said the board settled on a 50-50 funding formula, even

though Belmont officials called it flawed and not something that would be sustainable over time.

"It was kind of a rush job," he said of the old agreement.

Meanwhile, San Carlos' population grew, along with its commercial square footage and assessed valuation. In 1996, the city annexed much of the unincorporated Harbor Industrial Area. As a result, Belmont's fire protection district has lost \$3.8 million in property taxes over a 10-year period, which has flowed into San Carlos' general fund, Warden said.

Belmont negotiated with San Carlos to put

some of that revenue into the fire department's budget, but decided to compromise and let it go, Warden said.

"We're at the end of our rope, and I don't think people really understand that," he said.

Warden was, however, willing to give San Carlos another chance, after Lieberman said they are close to a funding model similar to what was put together for the failed assessment election.

"I was ready to pull the plug," Warden said. "The spirit (of the formula) is the same. I can't compromise any more than that."

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# Belmont Fire Protection District

## Proposed Fire Suppression Assessment

### *Quick Facts*

How much is your proposed annual assessment?

▶ <b>Residential (1 &amp; 2 Family Dwellings)</b>	<b>\$93.00</b>	<b>Per Unit</b>
Residential (3 or More Living Units)	71.38	Per Unit
Commercial (Stores & Offices)	0.0652	Per Sq Ft
Industry, Utility	0.0287	Per Sq Ft
Storage in Structures	0.0154	Per Sq Ft
Institutional (Hotels/Public Assembly/Educational)	538.96	Per Parcel
Vacant Land	66.92	Per Parcel

What will your annual assessment help to ensure?

- Local control of your fire department
- Four continuously staffed fire stations
- Additional firefighters
- Advanced training and equipment
- Quick response to emergencies by firefighters who know your community
- Funding to replace fire engines, trucks, stations and equipment
- Stable fire insurance rates for your home and/or business

What will happen if your annual assessment fails?

- Loss of local control of your fire fighting services
- Loss of qualified and highly experienced local firefighters
- Potential blackout or brownout of your local fire stations
- Increased response times
- Inability to replace aging fire equipment and to properly maintain fire stations

Campaign to Support Your  
Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department

404 Hainline Drive  
Belmont, CA 94002

August 28, 2006

Dear Dick & Margaret,

I am writing you today for two reasons. First is to review the great things that are happening with your new Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department. Second is to ask for your help to let others know before the ballots are mailed for the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department Assessment.

As you may know, the South County Fire Authority has been replaced with the new Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department. Leading the department is Doug Fry, our new Fire Chief. Doug is a 32 year veteran of your Fire Department.

Other highlights include a balanced budget for 2006-2007, a five year labor agreement with the Firefighters' Union, and a new cross-staffing schedule to ensure that the four engines or three engines and a truck are available at all times for fire suppression emergencies.

The last piece of the puzzle is to put the Fire Department on a strong financial footing. With the passage of the Belmont and San Carlos Fire Suppression Assessments, we will be able to retain local control of your fire department, hire additional firefighters, establish funds to replace aging fire equipment and maintain the fire stations, establish a 10% operating reserve, and retire the unfunded liabilities.

It is never easy to ask for money, especially for government, but we feel that your new Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department is worthy of your's and the community's support. Where we need your help is in our effort to the community about your new fire department and why a "Yes" vote for the fire assessment is essential.

For your convenience, we have enclosed a Quick Facts sheet and a pre-addressed envelope to inform us how you can support this vital campaign.

Thank you in advance for your support!

Sincerely,

Steve Warden

Belmont - San Carlos fire dept.  
San Mateo Co. Times  
August 19, 2006

## STANDING TALL



JEAN-PAUL HORRE — Staff

**NEW BELMONT-SAN CARLOS** firefighters (left to right) Scott James, Eric Conklin, Glenn Cherry, Kyle Smith, Micheal King, and Lee Rossi stand in front of the Granada Street Fire Station in Belmont on Friday after a badge-pinning ceremony while family members take portraits.

# A MESSAGE FROM YOUR **BELMONT-SAN CARLOS FIREFIGHTERS**

Whenever there's a life-threatening crisis in our communities, the first ones on the front line are our firefighters. These disasters can happen any time, so it's essential that our **local** fire department is there for us 24/7.

As your local firefighters, we're asking you to join us in keeping our fire services here where you need them by voting **YES** on the Fire Protection Assessment.



## What It Means for Belmont and San Carlos

- *Round-the-Clock Staffing ... to save lives*
- *State-of-the-Art Training ... to protect public safety*
- *New Engines and Equipment ... to meet any emergency*
- *Four Full Service Fire Stations ... for rapid response*
- *Increase Staffing ... more firefighters on duty each day*

## What It Means for You

**SECURE NEIGHBORHOODS** ... Faster response times saves lives and reduces potential property damage

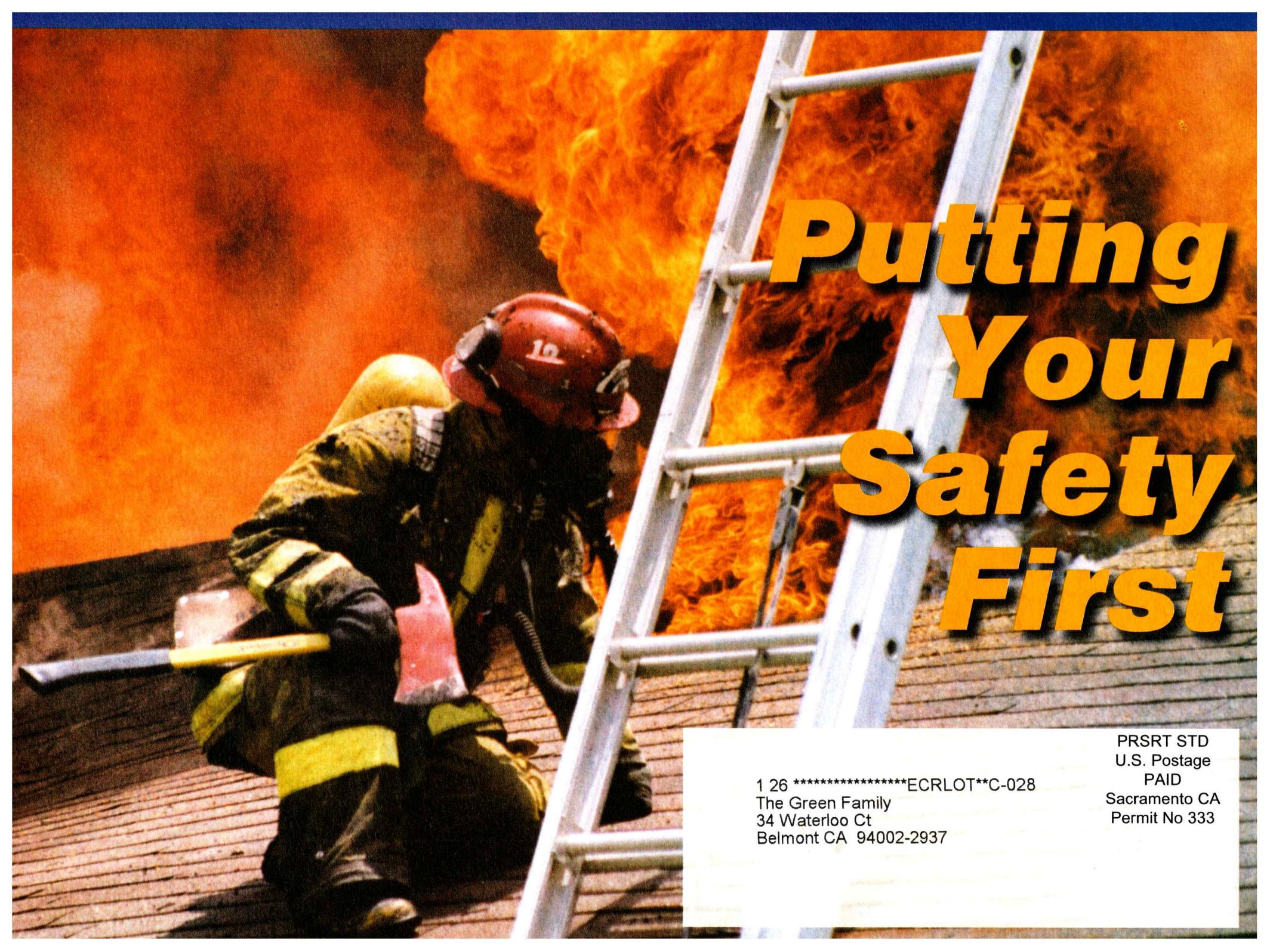
**FISCAL ACCOUNTABILITY** ... With locally-based fire service, Belmont and San Carlos taxpayers are in charge

**LOWER INSURANCE COSTS** ... High-quality fire services mean lower insurance costs for homeowners and businesses

**When your ballot comes in the mail,  
please support responsive and responsible  
fire protection for Belmont and San Carlos.**

For more information, please go to [www.belmont-sancarlosfd.com](http://www.belmont-sancarlosfd.com)

**Vote YES on the Fire Protection Assessment**

A firefighter in full gear, including a red helmet with the number '10', is climbing a silver ladder. The firefighter is holding a yellow-handled tool. The background is a large, intense fire with bright orange and yellow flames. The scene is set on a wooden roof.

# **Putting Your Safety First**

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# FIREFIGHTING & RESCUE

## Report to Belmont Residents

### MESSAGE From the Fire Chief

The Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department provides all-risk fire and emergency services to the Cities of Belmont and San Carlos as well as the unincorporated Harbor Industrial Area.

The Fire Department, particularly in the last three years, has had to do more with less. Facing budget constraints, the Fire Department was forced to lay off seven firefighters as well as staff who ensure that our firefighters are well trained. These staffing cuts forced an engine out of service.

The Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department is committed to operating a highly efficient Fire Department but cannot presently provide the level of service that the Fire Commission or I believe necessary to adequately protect our community. That is why we are considering an assessment. I will be sending you more information in the next couple of weeks on this important matter. Feel free to call me with any questions you may have, at 650-802-4254.

Sincerely,

Douglas Fry  
Fire Chief

**T**hree years ago, the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department, formerly known as South County Fire Department, reduced firefighting positions and 9-1-1 service level capabilities. These cuts eliminated one engine company, paramedic staffing on another, as well as staff who ensure our firefighters are well trained and prepared.

As outlined further in this report, your Fire Department has taken many steps to live within its means. Nonetheless, increased 9-1-1 demands, the need to provide quality and reliable fire protection coverage while making budget cuts, now means that local homeowners are being asked to consider an assessment to fund future fire protection services.

Understanding the importance of continuing to provide quality and reliable fire protection and prevention services while maintaining local oversight of the fire department, this June, an important agreement was reached between San Carlos and Belmont. The agreement calls for strengthening your Fire Department and the services they provide to you on the condition that additional funds are made available.



Shortly, all property owners in Belmont will be asked to consider the merits of a fire protection assessment through an all mail-in ballot.



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## The Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department wants to hear from you!

We'd like to be able to respond to the community's questions or comments about local firefighting and rescue needs.

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Questions: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My organization would like to host a presentation from the Fire Department.

Contact Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Organization: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_



# cue needs

Q  
A

## **What happens if the Fire Protection Assessment is not adopted?**

Obviously, we would be unable to restore the fourth engine to better meet the demands on service. We would be unable to staff at a level of fifteen firefighters for all schedule/shift needs, adding to the potential for temporary station closures due to staffing shortages, and resulting in increased response times for fire and medical emergencies. The department would also have no reserves for emergencies, equipment, facility needs or replacement of aging vehicles.

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## **When will an election be held?**

Assessments are processed by all mail-in ballot; there are no polling stations as in a typical election. Ballots will be mailed September 28, 2006. You will have 45 days to return your ballot by mail or by hand delivery to the Belmont City Clerk at One Twin Pines Lane, Suite 375 during normal business hours.

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## **What will it cost?**

A single family residential owner will pay \$93 per year. Other categories exist and will be detailed in our second informational mailing. Please watch for the second mailing on or about the 21<sup>st</sup> of September.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Place  
First  
Class  
Stamp  
Here



Chief Douglas Fry  
One Twin Pines Lane  
Belmont, CA 94002

# Facts about firefighting and re

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## **What steps has the Fire Department made to be more efficient?**

In 1979 the Cities of Belmont and San Carlos merged their Fire Departments into what was then known as South County Fire Department. It was specifically formed to be more efficient and to save money. At that time, there were six fire stations and nine firefighting companies. Upon implementation, duplication of staff was eliminated, six stations were reduced to four, and nine firefighting companies reduced to five. In the last three years, the Department has made further cuts to staffing and equipment to live within the limited revenues available. There are currently three stations with one engine company at each, and one station with a truck company.

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## **What are the needs of the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department?**

The Fire Department will retain four fire stations: two in Belmont and two in San Carlos. It will also retain three engine companies and a truck company; 13 firefighters are the minimum needed to staff this equipment. Although the current budget covers day-to-day firefighting operations, the lack of adequate funds keeps aging equipment and vehicles in the field long after industry standards call for replacement to ensure that reliable equipment is available for emergency services.

Q  
A

## **Why act now?**

The Fire Commission believes that budget cuts have reduced fire protection funding to a bare bones level. Furthermore, there are no reserves for unforeseen emergencies. As stated, past actions have been taken to reduce costs, however, the Fire Commission desires to add back the fourth engine. The plan is to create a 'cross staffed' company. Simply stated, the company would respond with an engine or truck, depending on the type of call. To institute the plan, the Fire Chief is proposing to add two firefighters, bringing the total to 15.

