

Supervisor Rowe Addresses the Dilemmas Surrounding the Fire Tax



A good turnout in Johnson Valley covered many topics of interest to our unincorporated desert communities, including subscription emergency helicopter service; traffic safety on Hwy 247; and State issues came up.

The Council was pleased to have County Supervisor Dawn Rowe on hand for the third time this year, particularly to hear about the Board of Supervisors recent resolution about the Fire Tax.

She said Fire Protection Zone 5, FP-5, started nine years ago in Helendale with a tax passed by 2/3 vote. Later expansions by vote of the people brought it to the point it generated about \$21 million for the General Fund for fire protection services.

The Fire Department still ran a deficit. The old Board felt they should not be on the General Fund, but is this appropriate? Baker's residents cannot pay for all the calls for service that come to that station from the Interstate; this is an example that is appropriate to subsidize out of the General Fund.

But when 29 Palms incorporated, they taxed themselves for fire protection, but not on their property taxes. They later decided this cost too much and asked the County for fire service. They still do not pay on their property

taxes. Prop 13 regulations do not allow amending that. When a city decides they cannot afford to have Fire, the County is forced to take them, which is not fair to County Fire or their budget. This problem must be solved.

The path taken was to annex via a "protest procedure," because the Board thought voters would not pass it otherwise: services would be cut. They expanded FP-5 making it permanently larger.

On Tuesday, June 11, the Supervisors acted to sunset the funding for FP-5 in two years or there would be no funding after July 1st. Later they discovered the new FP-5 zone with the existing zone, all funding would cease.

The Board voted 4-1 to sunset the fire tax in two years without an increase. The Board must replace it, yet not cut services or impact our quality of life. County Fire must open up their books to give us a greater understanding that she can pass on to her constituents; that they have cut what can be cut. We must figure out a sales tax or other funding. If County Fire needs an increase, it will come from the General Fund. In 90 days we must have a plan to increase revenues or cut services. The Voters will decide.

We need to start fresh with County Fire as partners.

Questioned about the costs of retirement pensions, Rowe said they should honor the contracts, but renegotiate starting with new hires. She encouraged us to speak to Local 935 of the Firemen's Union about the practice of working massive overtime to increase pensions, called "pension-spiking."

Concerning use of firemen when about 80% of calls for service are medical: when an ambulance is available, they answer the call, but there are EMT's on the trucks. The fire chiefs are looking into Priority Dispatch, to reduce medical calls that fire trucks answer. In our area, however, Priority Dispatch will create challenges for Morongo Basin Ambulance. As a not-for-profit company, they need a cost-recovery mechanism to be solvent.

Requests: that when this comes to a vote, write the ballot so that a Yes vote does not mean No.

Competing interests and thorny questions must be settled quickly, in the best interests of mostly low-income taxpayers in disadvantaged communities.



Summer Solstice Fest!



In Homestead Valley Park>>>

Pizza Made to Order!
8 Craft Beers & a Cider!
Lemonade!

Snacks!
Ice Cream!

3 Bands on Stage!
Cornhole Game!
Fire Truck!



HVCC thanks our volunteers and the **MOJAVE DESERT BREWERS GUILD** for this successful fundraiser!!