



## **Mountain Democrat's Three-Part Series on El Dorado County Fire & Rescue Services**

Part one of this three-part series described fire district funding inequities in El Dorado County and the status of a proposed regional consolidation. Part two explored how districts across the county are struggling to get smaller, the history of the funding inequities and how salaries compare across districts. Part three looks at the west slope fire districts individually, and reports how the aid-to-fire cuts will affect the rural districts.

**Part-I, Fire Districts Cut to the Bone, Wednesday, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2011**

**Part-II, Firefighter Salaries Don't Tell the Whole Story, Friday, March 18<sup>th</sup> 2011**

**Part-III, Fire Districts Look for Economies, Monday, March 21<sup>st</sup> 2011**

**Story by Mike Roberts, Mother Lode News**

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## Fire districts cut to the bone

*Editor's note— Part 1 of this three-part series describes fire district funding inequities in El Dorado County and the status of a proposed regional consolidation. Part 2 will explore how districts across the county are struggling to get smaller, the history of funding inequities and how salaries compare across districts. Part 3 will look at the west slope fire districts individually, and report how the aid-to-fire cuts will affect the rural districts.*

Pioneer Fire Chief Robert Gill reported that Station 31, which serves the Grizzly Flat and Happy Valley communities, is no longer being staffed. Some response times will double.

Rescue is down two full positions. Georgetown cut one captain and two seasonals. The Diamond Springs El Dorado Fire Protection District is down six positions. Members also gave themselves an 8 percent across-the-board pay cut.

Volunteers and seasonal firefighters are seeing more action in fire districts county-wide as fire chiefs fight for their fiscal lives in the face of lower property tax revenues and the looming termination of county aid-to-fire, which has pumped \$1.3 million into underfunded rural fire districts annually since 2001.

The recession and housing crisis exacerbated funding inequities built into the property tax distribution system in the aftermath of Proposition 13, which froze property tax at 1 percent of assessed property value in 1978.

At the time, cities, counties, and special districts: fire, schools, utility and recreation, split up the 1 percent, approximating the portion of tax revenue each agency received prior to 1978.

Those original tax allocations, or “increments,” have remained largely unchanged since then.

The housing boom provided a healthy revenue influx in the early to mid-2000s, especially in more urban districts. El Dorado Hills was able to stockpile a huge reserve while building spacious fire stations, buying equipment and adding staff.

Underfunded rural fire districts continued to languish, however, getting by with tight staffing and aging equipment, depending on volunteers and neighboring districts in a tight mutual aid agreement.

The El Dorado County Board of Supervisors recognized the situation and instituted an “aid-to-fire” subsidy for eight rural fire districts in 2001, supplementing their property tax revenue from the county General Fund to a level equal to the median tax allocation for county fire districts, 13 percent.

The clock is ticking for those six western slope and two Tahoe fire districts, following the Board of Supervisors' 2009 decision to end the \$1.3 million aid-to-fire subsidy, an action that will likely change how, and perhaps how much fire and ambulance services are provided in El Dorado County.

The board shuffled fire and ambulance funding last year to help the aid-to-fire recipients get through the end of 2011 while consultants were hired and reports written. Fire officials contacted for this story said they'd hoped that the resulting "Citygate" report would contain more specific solutions to the funding crisis.

Almost two years later, it's now up to the fire chiefs to develop a road map to fiscal viability in a system of geographically, demographically, culturally and economically disparate districts.

The system's strong mutual aid agreement is likely to spread the impact around the entire county. On the western slope it will be felt most in the districts who received aid-to-fire:

Garden Valley, Georgetown, Latrobe, Mosquito, Pioneer and Rescue.

The 2007-2008 grand jury encouraged them to economize by merging with neighboring districts, stopping short at Meeks Bay and Fallen Leaf, which are too geographically isolated to merge.

Consolidations are nothing new in El Dorado County. Diamond Springs and El Dorado joined forces in 1979. Several rural districts consolidated with Placerville's fire department between 1991 and 1994 to form the El Dorado County Fire Protection District.

El Dorado County Fire Chief Bruce Lacher reported that merging the compensation packages from the previously independent districts was complex and time consuming. "Some bargaining units had to make sacrifices," he said. "But the agencies involved wanted it, which helped."

In response to the Citygate Report, Rescue Fire Chief Tom Keating and former El Dorado Hills Chief Brian Veerkamp proposed a hybrid regional consolidation that would annex rural fire districts into El Dorado Hills Fire. The rural districts would have retained their identity, with full control over district policies, compensation agreements and staffing, serving with relative autonomy under an umbrella El Dorado Hills Fire Board.

Precedent in state law for such a hybrid annexation proved unclear, however. Rural district chiefs were only lukewarm to the idea in two county-wide meetings. The proposal died when the El Dorado Hills Fire Board concluded that the proposal wouldn't be in the best interest of their community. In the Feb. 17 board meeting they asked interim Fire Chief Jim O'Camb to draft a letter to the county fire chiefs updating them on the district's position and indicating that El Dorado Hills remains open to proposals from neighboring districts.

Latrobe, Cameron Park and Rescue all rejected proposed mergers with El Dorado Hills between 1996 and 2006.

El Dorado Hills is not without suitors, however. Representatives of the Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District have contacted the El Dorado Hills Fire District through the union leadership. Board President Greg Durante reports that no formal discussions have been held.

Meanwhile, Georgetown and Garden Valley are working toward their own consolidation, a move that Garden Valley Chief Bill Dekker said would "take two underfunded districts and make one larger underfunded district."

Fire officials from Rescue and Diamond Springs-El Dorado have also met to discuss working together.

Any mergers would likely consolidate the partner districts' administrative staffs. Todd Cunningham, the Diamond Springs-El Dorado Fire Protection District chief, predicted that the talks themselves would yield greater resource sharing and create opportunities to centralize operations such as training, vehicle maintenance, incident command responsibility and prevention programs.

Conventional district mergers typically must reconcile district policies and compensation packages defined by employee agreements that specify wages, benefits and station staffing levels.

The cost of bringing the "have not" firefighters up to "have" levels could easily outweigh savings from consolidating districts.

For that reason, Keating predicted that any "sub-regional consolidation" that occurs will likely take the form of a "contract for service," which would simplify personnel issues and allow both districts to retain their identities.

Part two will examine firefighter compensation in all eight western slope fire districts.

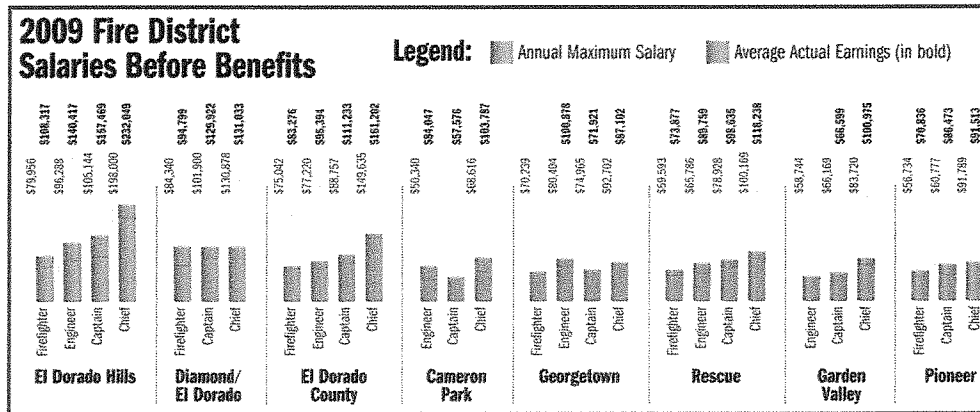
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News

Thursday, March 17th, 2011 | Posted by [Mike Roberts](#)

## Part 2: Firefighter salaries don't tell the whole story



*Part one of this three-part series described fire district funding inequities in El Dorado County and the status of a proposed*

*regional consolidation. Part two explores how districts across the county are struggling to get smaller, the history of the funding inequities and how salaries compare across districts. Part three will look at the west slope fire districts individually, and report how the aid-to-fire cuts will affect the rural districts.*

Compensation for those we call when our house is on fire, the the men and women who walk into our burning forests, pull our kids from mangled cars and come to our parents' assistance when they've fallen and can't get up, varies widely across the county, as does the fiscal condition of the districts which employ them.

Despite all the training required and the inherent dangers, it's a job to which thousands of young men and women aspire. Many graduate from California fire academies each year, but most never make it to the fire house. Many don't survive the intense paramedic training, rigorous testing or the scrutiny of the background check.

Latrobe Chief Chris Couper employs four recent graduates, whom he jokingly calls "indentured servants."

"The wage is low, but it's a foot in the door for them," he said by phone.

In 2009, Latrobe's highest paid part-timer made \$31,200.

In the past, he had a hard time filling those positions. These days, there are plenty of applicants when he has an opening.

A recent survey by the National League of Cities found that fire agencies across the country are shrinking. An informal survey of fire chiefs on the west slope confirms that El Dorado County is no different.

**They won't leave**

The El Dorado Hills Fire Board recently upped a \$50,000 exit incentive to \$75,000 or two years CalPERS credit for any firefighter who resigns or retires.

Most of the takers thus far have been chiefs already primed for retirement. One captain threatened with termination for alleged disciplinary troubles also availed himself of the exit incentive.

Firefighters won handsome salaries, favorable work shifts and spectacular benefits in recent years, all of which had made them increasingly intransigent.

In California the groundwork for the retirement plans which firefighters and other government workers now enjoy — benefits that are currently being scrutinized nationwide — was laid in 1999 when SB 400 sailed through the California Legislature virtually unopposed. It increased retirement benefits for firefighters and law enforcement to 3 percent of the employee's top annual salary for each year worked, eligible at the barely-grey-at-the-temples age of 50.

The bill's sponsors predicted at the time that the cost of the bill would be \$650 million in 2010, according to Adam Summers, a policy analyst for the Reason Foundation. The actual 2010 cost was \$3.3 billion, according to a recent CalPERS press release.

CalPERS lost \$56.2 billion for the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2009. As a result, CalPERS contributions jumped to 28 percent of each firefighter's salary last year, according to CalPERS. Many district officials remember when CalPERS was funded entirely through its investments.

#### **Not all shifts are created equal**

Paid firefighters in El Dorado County work 24-hour days in various combinations. Most districts have adopted a "two-on, four-off" work schedule known as a "48-96" shift, which consists of two consecutive 24-hour shifts, followed by four consecutive days off. It averages out to 56 hours per week.

Cameron Park has outsourced its fire and ambulance duties to CalFire, whose members works an extra day before their "four off" each week. The resulting "three-on, four-off" schedule totals 72 hours per week.

Georgetown Fire works a "traditional Kelly" shift, alternating three non-consecutive 24 hour work shifts with two 24-hour and one 96-hour off shifts.

#### **Salary comparisons**

Comparing overall compensation packages for fire districts is tricky business. The districts work different shift schedules at different pay rates with varying overtime and bonus opportunities. See sidebar *All shifts are not created equal* on page 1.

The state Controller's Office reports salary information from cities, counties and special districts annually and provides a foundation for comparing fire service compensation levels. The most recent reports are for calendar year 2009.

A quick perusal of the reports confirms El Dorado Hills' position at the top of the payroll ladder in El Dorado County. They also make it abundantly clear that stated salary ranges don't tell the whole compensation story.

Public sector employee retirement benefits have received a lot of attention recently. But actual earnings, before benefits, can stretch 50 percent or more beyond base salary. The maximum salary for an El Dorado Hills firefighter/paramedic in 2009 was \$79,956, according to the State Controller's Office, but they earned, on average \$108,317.

Salary bloat is even more pronounced as you climb the salary ladder. The maximum salary for an El Dorado Hills captain was \$105,144 in 2009, but their actual earnings averaged \$157,469. One made \$196,000.

El Dorado Hills interim Fire Chief Jim O'Camb explained that much of the overage is overtime paid by the state for participation in summer strike forces. The balance is overtime for shift coverage and education bonuses.

Overtime is less prevalent in rural fire districts, where staffing requirements are lower. An engine commonly operated by two firefighters in most of the county requires four at El Dorado Hills Station 87.

Volunteers play a greater role in day-to-day operations in rural districts, where flexible employee agreements let the chiefs use their volunteers and part-timers in creative ways.

In Diamond Springs, resident firefighter programs regularly put fully trained and qualified local businessmen on fire engines and in ambulances.

"These guys won't take any money," said Chief Todd Cunningham. "It's a point of pride with them. They're doing it to serve their community."

Cunningham offers a variety of volunteer programs. Some pay stipends to career-minded volunteers, others, like the resident firefighter program, target altruistic locals.

Diamond Springs-El Dorado's paid firefighter-paramedics' maximum salary is \$84,340. They took home, on average, \$94,799 in 2009.

By comparison, El Dorado County Fire's firefighter paramedics' maximum salary was \$75,042. They took home, on average, \$83,276.

Rescue's salaries are lower, but reflect a similar jump from maximum salary, \$55,993 to actual takehome, \$73,877.

The Pioneer Fire District listed three firefighter-paramedics in the 2009 report. They averaged \$70,836 on a \$56,734 maximum salary.

Chief salaries vary with district size and budget, with former El Dorado Hills Chief Brian Veerkamp firmly on top at \$232,049 in 2009. El Dorado County Fire Chief Bruce Lacher took second with \$161,202. Rescue Fire Chief Tom Keating made \$118,238.

CalFire Battalion Chief Joe Tyler calls the shots in Cameron Park. He made \$109,661 in 2009.

Garden Valley Chief Bill Dekker made \$100,975. Pioneer Chief Robert Gill made \$91,513. Only Georgetown Chief Greg Schwab left anything on the table, earning \$87,102 of a \$97,702 maximum salary.

The Mosquito Fire Protection District didn't file salary information with the state. Chief Bob Davis, who wears several hats at the small district that's had some big fires, reported by phone that he makes \$61,000 per year.

Latrobe Fire Chief Chris Couper takes no salary.

*Next time Part 3: West Slope fire district details.*

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News

Sunday, March 20th, 2011 | Posted by [Mike Roberts](#)

## Part 3: Fire districts look for economies

*Part one of this three-part series described fire district funding inequities in El Dorado County and the status of a proposed regional consolidation. Part two explored how districts across the county are struggling to get smaller, the history of the funding inequities and how salaries compare across districts. Part three looks at the west slope fire districts individually, and reports how the aid-to-fire cuts will affect the rural districts.*

Stressed out west slope fire chiefs have watched their property tax revenues plummet precipitously in recent years. Surveyed for this story, they described trying to do more with less, shrinking their organization while maintaining service levels by making creative use of volunteers and seasonal workers, often supervised by their few remaining paid firefighters.

As the county aid-to-fire subsidy to six west slope rural fire districts winds down, the chiefs are girding their loins for tougher times to come.

With compensation and benefits now accounting for up to 85 percent fire district operations budgets, Diamond Springs-El Dorado Fire Chief Todd Cunningham predicted that the loss of aid-to-fire fire funds would result in staffing cuts which “will likely alter the current closest resource response concepts, which will have a drastic effect on the way fire and rescue emergencies are mitigated in the county.”

Plain spoken Rescue Fire Chief Tom Keating stated the situation more simply: “There will be less people going to fires. That’s a fact.”

The four largest fire districts on the West Slope received no aid-to-fire subsidy from the county, but all face lower tax revenues.

### **Diamond Springs district**

Chief Cunningham mixes a staff of 17 paid firefighters with 23 volunteers to staff five fire houses.

That’s down six bodies from peak staffing, but it wasn’t enough to offset lower revenues, so firefighters, management and admin staff all voted to take an 8 percent across-the-board salary decrease, according to Cunningham.

His firefighters have a long history of working cooperatively with their district, having built headquarters Station 49 and the Firefighters Hall in Diamond Springs themselves.

The Diamond district’s roughly 24,000 residents paid \$3.1 million in property taxes to the fire district in 2009, placing them third in the county behind El Dorado Hills, at \$14 million and El Dorado County, at \$8.3 million according to the Citigate Report.

Diamond Springs firefighters averaged almost \$95,000 per year in 2009, according to the State Controller’s office, second only to El Dorado Hills firefighters.

Their captains also did well, averaging nearly \$130,000 per year in 2009, again second only to El Dorado Hills captain/paramedics.

Those salaries were achieved without the benefit of a union.

District administrators have discussed consolidation with Rescue, a district that Cunningham described as having a similar culture.

### **El Dorado Hills**

When the Proposition 13 dust settled after the June 1978 election, the El Dorado Hills Fire and Water District found itself with a county-best 17.5 percent slice of local property tax, which provided the foundation for its current fiscal well-being.

Visionary former Chief Bob Cima had a knack for timing. He instituted one of the first development fees in the state just before El Dorado Hills became home to a west-county housing boom. The development fees funded the capital equipment investments, the new stations, additional staff and equipment required to create a modern district perched on the urban-wildland interface with one foot in a rural county and the other in an affluent suburb.

The district has a history of board-level fiscal stewardship. The results speak for themselves: a \$23 million reserve, \$9 million of which is allocated to liabilities, such as equipment replacement and retiree medical costs.

Facing lower tax revenues, the current board is doing its best to balance the budget without cutting services or tapping into the reserve. Firefighters got no raises last year, and eliminated a couple of positions with exit incentives. The administration also streamlined, eliminating training and fire prevention captain positions.

El Dorado Hills salaries and benefits are higher at every position than their counterparts in the other West Slope fire districts, a testament to active and effective union leadership in recent years.

Personnel costs soak up 86 percent of the \$15 million operating budget, but have remained relatively static over the last three years.

Overtime, however, has not. It rose to \$2.3 million out of \$13.5 million slated for salaries and benefits last year despite call volumes that have dropped to an average of 1.5 calls per 24-hour shift per station.

By contrast, Diamond Springs Station 49 runs approximately the same call volume from one station with a two-person engine company. El Dorado Hills runs four firefighters on each engine.

Last year's El Dorado Hills fire budget contained over \$500,000 in across-the-board, recurring annual education bonuses, all calculated as a percent of total earnings, including overtime, of which there is plenty.

Firefighters, engineers and captains all took advantage of the ample overtime and bonus opportunities in 2009. Engineer paramedics with a max salary of \$96,300 averaged \$140,400.

A captain paramedic's max salary was roughly \$105,000, but they took home, on average \$157,469.

The current union contract expires in July. Negotiations are under way for its replacement.

### **Cameron Park**

Fire service in Cameron Park is the responsibility of the Community Services District, which outsourced it to CalFire in 1996, and has repeatedly extended the agreement, which currently runs through 2013. They did the job for \$2.7 million last year, according to Battalion Chief Joe Tyler.

The Cameron Park Community Services District represents 16,331 residents. It is paying off a handsome new community center and pool, and like its sister districts, is facing a steep drop in tax revenues. It received no aid-to sire subsidy.

The CSD is allowed to cut CalFire's budget with 120 days notice, which it recently delivered. Chief Tyler said he's trying to find alternatives to cutting any of his 21 firefighters.

In 2009 CalFire engineer-paramedics made an average of just over \$84,000, including overtime, in Cameron Park, ranking well below neighboring engineer paramedics in El Dorado Hills: \$140,000, El Dorado County: \$95,000 and Georgetown: \$101,000, according to the State Controller's Office.

CalFire captain-paramedics ranked similarly, earning \$92,500 per year on average, compared to El Dorado Hills: \$157,500, El Dorado County: \$111,000 and Rescue: \$98,000.

Cameron Park's overtime was low, \$5,000 on average for engineer paramedics and \$2,300 for captain-paramedics in 2009.

CalFire works a "three-on, four-off" shift schedule that yields 156 24-hour days per year, whereas the more popular "48-96" schedule (two-on, four off) yields only 120 24-hour days per year, before overtime kicks in.

Chief Tyler cites his salaries and work schedule as evidence that CalFire is a cost-effective solution for Cameron Park taxpayers.

Cameron Park also has eight active volunteers and roughly 22 trained but unpaid resident firefighters.

### **El Dorado County**

The El Dorado County Fire Protection District is the product of a 1991 consolidation between Placerville, Pleasant Valley, Shingle Springs and Pollock Pines-Camino fire districts. Coloma-Lotus, Strawberry and the Highway 50 corridor were subsequently annexed into the district, making it the second largest fire district in the county, 281 square miles with a population of roughly 77,000, according to Chief Bruce Lacher.

The \$6.3 billion assessed value of its 23,800 homes was second only to the \$7.5 billion value of El Dorado Hills' 14,200 newer and generally larger homes in 2009, according to the Citygate

report. Its 86 employees work from 15 different fire stations funded by \$8.3 million in property tax revenue in 2009.

County firefighter paramedics made an average of \$83,276, less than El Dorado Hills and Diamond Springs, but a full notch above CalFire, Rescue, Garden Valley, Pioneer and Rescue.

Captain-paramedics took home \$111,233 in 2009, and ranked similarly, according to the State Controller's Office.

Chief Bruce Lacher reported that union negotiations are currently active, and that retirement and health benefits are being restructured to reduce cost, including lowering the retirement benefit to "two at 50."

"The firefighters came to the table willing to talk," he said. "We're looking at different health plans now."

### Smaller districts

Six fire districts on the West Slope split a total of \$1.3 million in aid-to-fire subsidies annually since 2001. The El Dorado County Board of Supervisors has eliminated those subsidies as of the current fiscal year.

**Rescue** – The Rescue Fire Protection District is located in the center of the county, and is often on the road supplying automatic aid to its neighbors. Its 5,300 residents occupy 2,365 homes, mostly in heavily wooded large parcels, often at the end of narrow roads. They generated \$891,000 in property tax revenues for the district in 2009.

Rescue also received \$202,000 in aid-to-fire.

Rescue Fire Chief Tom Keating reported that he's already down two positions, and is cutting one more on July 1. He currently has eight full-time positions, and staffs two firefighters per shift.

"After that, we have to look at service levels," said Keating, who fought hard to attain around-the-clock paid staffing, and now sees the aid-to-fire cut taking it away.

Rescue firefighter-paramedics averaged \$70,800 in 2009, according to the state controller. Captain-paramedics made \$66,600 on average. Chief Keating took home \$91,500.

Rescue also enjoys an active volunteer organization, currently at 25 members, that may assume an even more important role next year.

**Georgetown** – Chief Greg Schwab reports that his Georgetown Fire Protection District protects 1,486 homes in and around Georgetown with a population that reaches 6,000 on hot summer weekends, when the ambulance is running up and down Wentworth Springs Road to the Crystal Basin, an important recreation district 30 miles to the east.

In 2009 their property tax revenue was less than \$425,000. Georgetown received \$36,000 in aid-to-fire.

Georgetown has 10 paid firefighters, down from 13 a year ago, augmented by 37 volunteers that are paid for shift work.

Five full-time engineer-paramedics made an average of \$100,900 in 2009, according to the state controller. The one full-time captain-paramedic made \$72,000.

Georgetown and Garden Valley are considering consolidation, said Schwab.

**Garden Valley** – Garden Valley’s property tax revenue is comparable to Georgetown’s, but it received more aid-to-fire: \$205,200.

Chief Bill Dekker reports that they’re currently making ends meet with reserve funds, and have left a secretary position vacant. They’re also relying on volunteers more. Cost-of-living and merit raises have been frozen since 2008. He also reports more use of part-timers to cover overtime shifts.

The four full-time captains listed on the state controller’s report averaged \$66,600 in 2009. The highest paid engineer took home \$51,900.

The loss of aid-to-fire will result in cutting two of the full-time positions, said Dekker. The one engine that’s staffed around the clock will drop to one-person staffing.

Training of all types will be scaled way back. Dekker worried about meeting current service levels, and said that his board would evaluate the district’s ability to provide mutual aid to neighboring districts.

**Pioneer** — The Pioneer Fire Protection District consists of a headquarters station and five volunteer stations responsible for protecting 296 square miles in the largely agricultural south central portion of the county, including Somerset, Grizzly Flat, Fair Play, and surrounding communities. Its 2,800 dwellings and 7,000 residents generated \$638,000 in property taxes for their district in 2009.

The district also received \$279,000 in aid-to-fire from the county.

The district staffs a mix of paid firefighters and volunteers, and now staffs an advanced life support engine with paramedics.

Chief Robert Gill reported that his district has a total of eight firefighters and paramedics, two resident firefighters, seven volunteers and active explorer and cadet programs. He’s had to lay off four part-time resident firefighters and no longer staffs Station 31 in Willows.

Without aid-to-fire, Gill said that the district would likely lose its paramedic program and half the paid staff. “I’ll be dispatching engines with just a driver,” he said.

The Pioneer fire board is currently considering a parcel tax or benefit assessment to address the shortfall.

**Latrobe** – The Latrobe Fire Protection District is a volunteer agency operating in the fiscal shadow of its northerly neighbor, El Dorado Hills. The district received only \$118,000 in property tax revenue in 2009.

Latrobe's aid-to-fire subsidy was \$168,000.

Latrobe has a three chiefs, a captain, and 25 volunteers, all unpaid. Aid-to-fire allows him to employ four recent fire academy graduates who work 10-hour daytime shifts Monday through Friday. Evenings and weekends its up to the volunteers.

Chief Chris Couper said that his district had accumulated roughly \$300,000 in reserve funds to replace aging equipment, and that it would use that to live on when aid-to-fire expires. "After that, we lose daytime coverage," he said.

El Dorado Hills Station 87, opened in the business park in 2007, is just 7.7 miles from central Latrobe, and often provides support in Latrobe.

**Mosquito** – The Mosquito Fire Protection District encompasses 13 square miles with roughly 550 homes, almost all nestled into the woody terrain. In 2009 the district's property tax revenue was \$137,700 and received \$35,000 in aid-to-fire. Its 1,235 residents already pay a West Slope high \$229 per home annual assessment for fire protection, according to the Citygate Report.

Chief Bob Davis reported that he is compensated one third as chief, with two paid firefighters and over 20 volunteers. The chief could not be reached at press time to discuss the impact on the Mosquito district of the loss of aid-to-fire.

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