

Atherton tweaks subcommittee looking into fire district expense



Change makes it possible for Mayor Lewis to be part of discussions



John Orr / Daily News Engine 3 of the Menlo Park Fire Protection District is parked at the Atherton Fire Station on Almondal Avenue on Wednesday afternoon, Oct. 28, 2015. The Atherton City Council is studying how much the Fire District costs the taxpayers of the town, and what services it gets for that money.

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The Atherton City Council, in an Oct. 5 study session, discussed financial information it has received from the Menlo Fire Protection District, and changed the composition of its subcommittee tasked with liaising with the fire district.

The subcommittee originally included Council Member Cary Wiest and Vice Mayor Michael Lempres. The fire district had requested to also meet with Mayor Elizabeth Lewis, but if the three members of the City Council were to meet at the same time, it would have to be formally advertised as a City Council meeting.

So, Lempres dropped off the subcommittee, and Bob Polito, a member of the town's Audit & Finance Committee, was added.

The council is likely to elevate Lempres to mayor in November, when Lewis' term ends. Lempres would resume discussions on fire district issues at that time.

The new subcommittee met Tuesday morning with City Manager George Rodericks and agreed on four suggestions to present to the full City Council on Oct. 19 that would be investigated by an outside consultant, if the council, as expected, authorizes hiring such a consultant.

The four issues:

- What revenue does the fire district receive from Atherton property taxes? “The consultant would likely confirm what the first district has given us,” said Rodericks.
- What is the cost of providing fire protection and emergency response services, and what other services does the fire district provide, such as training and search and rescue?
- If there weren't a fire district, and the town was responsible for fire and emergency services, what would the costs be?
- If Atherton taxpayers want to question or to do anything about those issues, how would they do it? What mechanisms would be involved? Rodericks said possibilities include working at the legislative level and/or perhaps changing the distribution of property taxes.

Rodericks said residents have asked council members about fire services, including about the distribution of property tax revenue. Rodericks said that the town receives about \$7 million a year from Atherton property taxes, and the fire district receives about \$12 million from the same source.

“The fire district has provided a summary of revenues they receive from the town,” said Rodericks last week. “We'll be using that moving forward. And they provided links to their website detailing their budget, audit, summaries of coverage and deployment, but there's no real way to drill down into that data and access what the cost of services is to Atherton residents only.”

Studying the library

In other discussion on Oct. 5, the City Council gave guidance to council member Rick DeGolia regarding his duties as council representative to the Atherton Library, which is part of the San Mateo County Library Joint Powers Authority.

The big issue is how much money the library receives from Atherton property taxes. The library receives more money than it needs to operate,

which is how it has been able to accumulate enough savings to pay for its reconstruction during the planned Civic Center project.

Rodericks said the Joint Powers Agreement dictates that excess funds stay with the member agency whose locality generated the taxes. For the Atherton Library, that amounts to about \$1 million a year in operating funds, and another \$1 million in excess funds. But there has been talk among Joint Powers members to spread around some of Atherton's wealth to other libraries.

The council told DeGolia to work toward ensuring that the Atherton Library retains as much of its excess funds as possible going forward, with no changes to the Joint Powers Agreement till after construction of the Civic Center is completed, if then.

The other libraries in the Joint Powers Agreement are Belmont, Brisbane, East Palo Alto, Foster City, Half Moon Bay, Millbrae, Pacifica, Portola Valley, San Carlos, Woodside and unincorporated areas of San Mateo County, notably North Fair Oaks.

Excellence discussion

The City Council on Oct. 5 also briefly discussed the proposed excellence awards program, said Rodericks. The program was proposed by staff as a means of recognizing people who have gone "above and beyond" for the town, and is meant to make the awards a yearly event.

Exactly how many awards are to be given, and determined by what people on a committee, has fluctuated in different council discussions. Rodericks said a proposal is being written to be on the council's Oct. 19 agenda.

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John Orr John Orr edits and writes for Daily News feature pages, including arts and entertainment. He also reports on the Town of Atherton and some other cities. Previously, he was mysteries and thrillers books columnist for the Mercury News, and also wrote about movies and blues music.

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