

Atherton to seek fiscal review of fire services

Council instructs staff to seek bids for consultant to do the study

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Atherton Mayor Elizabeth Lewis at a City Council meeting on Wednesday, Oct. 19, 2016. (John Orr / Daily News)

The Atherton City Council on Wednesday evening decided to seek a fiscal review of the services the town receives from the Menlo Park Fire Protection District.

The council voted, 5-0, to authorize town staff to prepare a request for proposal from outside consultants to bid for the review.

After considerable discussion, the council decided to limit the initial review to three of four topics originally suggested by an ad hoc subcommittee comprised of Council Member Cary Wiest, Audit/Finance Committee Chair Bob Polito and City Manager George Rodericks.

The study is to include:

1. What revenue does the fire district receive from Atherton residents via property taxes in support of fire services?

Town staff, in the council agenda, noted that the fire district has provided a recent analysis containing this information, and the consultant's job would be to confirm it.

2. What is the cost of providing basic fire protection and emergency response services within Atherton from the fire district? Beyond basic services, what other special services does the fire district provide to Atherton residents (i.e., hazmat, CERT, urban search/rescue, etc.)? What do these add to the cost of basic fire services?

3. If there were not a fire district and the town were responsible for providing fire services independently, what would the cost of those services look like? What are the options? Would an additional fire station need to be built and staffed? If so, where would it be? What would it cost? What is the annual cost? What are the long-term cost models? What are the added liabilities? Are there any added benefits?

The fourth item, which the council decided not to pursue at this time, would be, "If Atherton taxpayers want to address the issues raised, how would they do so and what are the mechanisms for doing so?"

The interest in getting these questions answered began in 2013, Rodericks said, when staff was developing a page on the town's website listing various services residents can receive, and what they cost the residents, listing everything from telephone to sewer service.

But when the town tried to pin down the cost of fire protection services, the information was not easily forthcoming from the fire protection district. Chief Harold Schapelhouman said the district did not keep the information in the form the town wanted.

Rodericks said the town wanted to "drill down" into district information to get the answers, and since the district was unwilling to do that, the town has decided to hire a consultant to do that.

The fire district board has remained resistant to Atherton's request, and on

Tuesday voted to notify Rodericks by mail that it would not participate in the study.

Fire board director Charles Bernstein, who on Tuesday became the board's new liaison to Atherton, replacing Peter Carpenter, was at the Atherton Council meeting Wednesday, although he did not speak publicly. Mayor Elizabeth Lewis thanked him for being there, noting that it was a welcome change to have a fire board liaison at the meeting.