

Atherton Council, Fire Board hold joint study session

Tuesday meeting highlighted by mutual praise from both agencies

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The Atherton City Council and the Menlo Park Fire Protection District Board of Directors held a joint meeting on Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, in Jennings Pavilion at the town's Holbrook-Palmer Park. Clockwise from left are Fire Chief Harold Schapelhouman, Mayor Michael Lempres, Board Member Virginia Chang Kiraly, Board Vice President rex lanson, Board Member Chuck Bernstein, Board President Robert J. Silano, Board Member Peter Carpenter, Council Member Elizabeth Lewis, Council Member Rick DeGolia, Vice Mayor Bill Widmer, Acting Police Chief Joe Wade, Public Works Director Michael Kashiwagi, and Council Member Cary Wiest. The hand at left belongs to City Manager George Rodericks. (John Orr / Daily News)

Leaving the vituperation of September and October behind, the Menlo Park Fire District Board of Directors and the Atherton City Council held a joint meeting on Tuesday night in the town's Jennings Pavilion, and everybody played nice.

After some confusion as to who was in charge of the meeting, Board President Robert Silano or Atherton Mayor Michael Lempres, it was settled that the meeting would be largely casual, rules of order pretty much ignored.

Several times through the study session, Atherton council members mentioned how happy they were with the service provided to the town by the fire district, and various members of the fire congregation, including Chief Harold Schapelhouman, praised the town for its willingness to cooperate with the district.

“At some cities,” Schapelhouman said, “We only get to talk to the council during public comments for two minutes.”

Tensions between the two agencies had developed when the town began planning for its new civic center and asked the fire district if it would want to get involved, and maybe station a unit in the new facility. The district replied with a flat “no.”



Menlo Park Fire Protection District Board Member Virginia Chang Kiraly, left, and Atherton Mayor Michael Lempres compare notes during a joint meeting of the district board and the city council in Holbrook-Palmer Park on Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016. (John Orr / Daily News)

Concurrently, the town had begun a website posting in which it listed services

received by residents from various agencies, including costs for those services, and asked the fire district to provide such information for its services in Atherton.

The fire district responded that it didn't keep information in that form, and in an October letter from Silano said that it didn't have to provide that information to the town in any case.

Fire Board Member Peter Carpenter — a resident of Atherton and at that time the board's liaison to Atherton — accused the town of poor fiscal management, saying it was just trying to take money from the district to finance its new civic center.

On Tuesday, discussion began on other issues, including the need to “improve community education” regarding residential address numbering.

Fire Marshal Jon Johnston discussed the department's desire for residents to install illuminated residence numbers, to make it easier for emergency units to find the right home at night in the town's dark streets.

New construction is already getting such numbers, he pointed out, but as Carpenter said, it would be to residents' benefit if they all installed illuminated numbers.

Council Member Elizabeth Lewis said the town could communicate that thought to residents, perhaps in the town's weekly mailings to residents, with a questioning look to City Manager George Rodericks, who nodded in agreement.

Schapelhouman said “firefighters learn the streets in their first year on the job, plus we use GPS.”

The meeting included discussion of local assembly points for use in emergency situations. Carpenter, who is involved in organizing such community-based services in his Lindenwood neighborhood, displayed a sign

meant to be used to mark such an assembly point.

There are 16 designated areas in town meant to have assembly points and training for residents to be able to provide aid in the event of an earthquake or fire, before the trained professionals such as police officers and fire personnel show up. Only 10 of those 16 areas have leaders at the moment.

Acting Chief of Police Joe Wade spoke up in praise of the residents who get involved, “the people who get passionate about it.” Lindenwood, he said, “took the bull by the horns.” People need to do the drills, he said, which are part of the training provided by the fire district and police department.

Council Member Rick DeGolia suggested that the Lindenwood area might serve as an example to the rest of the town in developing a system of assembly points and placement of caches of emergency supplies.

With the meeting’s planned end time approaching, the conferees skipped ahead to discussion of the “District’s Vision for Fire Station 3 Growth.”

That facility, on Almendral Avenue near El Camino Real, is the only station actually in Atherton, although the town is served by five surrounding stations.

Still, the chief noted, expansion at State 3 would be desirable, although difficult to make happen. The district would like it to be large enough to have more than one bay for equipment, and that it be a drive-through bay.

“But look at the property around it,” Schapelhouman said. Purchasing surrounding properties in Atherton would be out of the question because of cost.



Menlo Park Fire Protection District Chief Harold Schapelhouman addresses a joint meeting of the district board of directors and the Atherton City Council on Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, at Holbrook-Palmer Park. A left is council member Cary Wiest. At right is City Manager George Rodericks. (John Orr / Daily News)

Schapelhouman said the district is studying the need for expansion of services in the area, especially when its units are pulled to an emergency on the east side of the 101 freeway, leaving less coverage for Atherton. He noted new demands for service in Menlo Park.

Menlo Park has approved a plan that allows up to 4,500 new residential units, 2.3 million square feet of new nonresidential uses and 400 new hotel rooms in the city's bayfront area.

So, as it turns out, as the fire district is currently studying how it might need the increase in demand for its services, adding a unit at the new Atherton civic center is at least a possibility.