

TUBAC FIRE STATION MAY BE REPLACED

Tubac Fire Station No. 1 violates some safety codes and talks have started about how to deal with the problems.

By Kathleen Vandervoet

In upcoming months, the five board members of the Tubac Fire District will be discussing the potential replacement of Fire Station No. 1 which is located at 2227 E. Frontage Road just north of the village.

Board members agreed at a Sept. 25 meeting that the station, built in 1978-79 for an all-volunteer force, doesn't meet current needs, violates some county safety codes, and remodeling it may not be feasible.

At this very early stage, Fire Chief Cheryl Horvath has indicated the fire station might be demolished and a new one built elsewhere, but no details have emerged.

Board member Mike Connelly said he didn't feel ready to vote to approve a change in the next few months because there is so much information to be learned and the financial impact will be large. "I personally need a little more time to grapple with it." Even so, he said, "We really want something to be done with Station 1."

Board member Bill Kirkpatrick said it's their responsibility to plan for the future. "Let the chief start the ball rolling. Let's get going. We've got all kinds of time," he said.

No plans have been developed, but a new fire station might cost about \$4 million, said Gabe Buldra, contract finance director for the fire district with the James Vincent Group. It could be paid for through a lease purchase over 15 years, and property taxes would increase.

Or, it could potentially be paid for through bond sales which voters approved in 2008, and taxes would increase, he said.

Currently and until 2028, the district is repaying bond costs for two Rio Rico area fire stations. State law limits how much in new bonds can be sold, Buldra said.

Horvath said one other possibility is that the district could sell a 150-foot-tall communications tower located on a hill west of Fire Station No. 2 at 1360 W. Frontage Road, Rio Rico. She said a "bid" of \$3.5 million was received for the tower, which hosts cell phone companies and some district radio coverage.

Deputy Chief Genaro Rivera gave board members a summary of the deficiencies at Fire Station No. 1 as noted by Santa Cruz County building officials. There is no fire sprinkler system and no interior sleeping space for on-duty employees, he said. The fire wall separation from the equipment bays and offices is not up to code.

Rivera said the aging electrical panel must be upgraded, there is no decontamination room or area for employees, and the access to the front entry and to bathrooms doesn't comply with the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act).



Photo by Kathleen Vandervoet

Security is lacking at the fire station. There is no lobby, so anyone coming in the front door can walk to any office. There's no protective fencing for the equipment in the area behind the station or for employee vehicles.

Rivera said they aren't able to wash the turnout protective clothing and will need a new laundry area and new plumbing which supports higher water use.

The apparatus bays are small since they were built so long ago and

fire trucks and related equipment are now taller and wider, leaving only a few inches to spare in the area.

All the board members have expressed their concern that on-duty employees have an inadequate place to sleep at night. To alleviate that, the board voted to allow Horvath to enter negotiations to lease a modular unit recently used by the Queen Creek (AZ) Fire District.

It has bedrooms, kitchen and bathrooms in its 15-foot by 66-foot space and will replace an old construction trailer that employees are now sleeping in. Horvath said it could be installed around the end of this year.

The Tubac Fire District includes the north half of Rio Rico, all of Tumacacori and Tubac, and the south half of Amado.

There are three other fire stations; the one near the Peck Canyon interchange of Interstate 19, and two east of the Santa Cruz River in Rio Rico at 333 Camino Josefina (Station 3) and 149 Ruta Camaron, (Station 4).

Connelly said the board also should discuss the futures of Station 3 and Station 4 which are "big, beautiful fire stations" but which are in rural areas and don't have as many calls to respond to as do Stations 1 and 2.

Horvath said she hoped the fire board will vote, at some time in the next few months, to give her the authority to move forward on the potential replacement project so she can bring in more information and answer questions.

Board member Candy Clancy said it's important to hold community forums so taxpayers can understand all the ramifications.

There was no talk about where the potential new fire station would be constructed. Horvath said the fire district might be able to sell the land on which the current station is located to help with construction costs, and after the meeting she said, "We have some property we're looking at" but didn't describe that.

Board chairperson Mary Dahl said after the meeting that she expects the topic to be discussed again at upcoming monthly meetings. The next meeting, which is open to the public, is Wednesday, Oct. 30, at 9 a.m. at Fire Station No. 2. Meeting agendas and other information can be viewed at www.tubacfiredistrict.org.