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## Tubac Fire District considers selling cell phone tower

Consultant says it could fetch \$5M; cash could be used for new station

By Kathleen Vandervoet • For the Nogales International

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The tower is located on a hill west of Tubac Fire Station No. 2 at 1360 W. Frontage Rd. in Rio Rico.

Photo by Kathleen Vandervoet

The Tubac Fire District has a valuable communications tower and an aging fire station. Now its governing board is considering selling one to pay for replacing the other.

The 150-foot-tall communications tower, which is used by four rent-paying cell phone companies, could bring in more than \$5 million, a consultant told the five-member fire board at an Oct. 30 meeting.

“It’s a good time to sell. There’s not a lot of supply,” said Thomas Waniewski, a consultant with Capital Telecom. But if the district waits a few years to sell, he added, they could “potentially lose \$1 million in value.”

American Tower Corp., which currently has a contract with the fire district to manage the tower, made a written offer in May 2018 to buy it for \$3.5 million. But Waniewski said the tower is worth more than that, according to an industry formula that sets a value at 17 to 20 times its annual rent income.

Four cell phone companies with equipment on the tower – AT&T, Verizon, Sprint and T-Mobile – pay a total of \$308,000 a year rent, Waniewski said. Multiply that amount by 17 and the value is \$5.23 million.

Located on a hill west of Tubac Fire Station No. 2 at 1360 W. Frontage Rd. in Rio Rico, the tower, erected in 1997, also supports a back-up repeater used by the fire district.

The downside to selling the tower is that the district would lose the annual rent payments. The Tubac Fire District collects \$185,000, or 60 percent, and American Tower receives \$123,200, under a contract that runs until 2022, Waniewski said.

The fire board members, after hearing that they might be able to get an offer around \$5 million, voted 5-0 to have Waniewski “coordinate an exploratory meeting with American Tower” about the potential sale.

Board member Candy Clancy said she’s withholding judgement. She said she would “hate to lose a nice income stream” when building a new fire station has not yet been decided on.

Fire Chief Cheryl Horvath has spoken to the board members at previous meetings about a potential new fire station to replace Station No. 1 at 2227 E. Frontage Rd. in Tubac.

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

The location of a replacement station hasn't been publicly discussed.

"We have some property we're looking at," Horvath said following the September board meeting, but didn't specify where it is.

### **Outdated station**

Deputy Chief Genaro Rivera on Sept. 25 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 Americans with Disabilities Act.

Security is also lacking at the fire station, he said. 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.

The apparatus bays are small since they weren't built for today's taller and wider fire trucks and related equipment, leaving only a few inches to spare in the area.

Board members have expressed their concern that on-duty employees have an inadequate place to sleep at night. Presently, they sleep in an old construction trailer with no bathroom facilities that's located next to the fire station.

District employees built two bedrooms inside the station in the late summer of 2017, but they had to be demolished after it was learned that the work was done without a county building permit and didn't meet certain safety requirements.

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

There are three other fire stations in the district: Station 2 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).

The next board meeting, which is open to the public, is at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 20, at Fire Station No. 2. Meeting agendas and other information can be viewed at [www.tubacfiredistrict.org](http://www.tubacfiredistrict.org).