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**Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 0908**  
**Surrounded by Water, Bethel Island  
Has Limited Access for Fighting Fires**  
**Inadequate funding leaves ECCFPD communities  
behind the rest of Contra Costa County in Fire Services**

**TO:**

**Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors  
East Contra Costa Fire Protection District**

**SUMMARY**

In 2002, the Board of Supervisors (BOS) consolidated three dependent fire districts, including Bethel Island. Prior to joining this district, it had become increasingly difficult for Bethel Island's fire fighting volunteers to maintain adequate staffing levels and performance due to changing standards and fire fighting techniques.

The BOS, in its application for the consolidation of the East County fire districts, recommended the formation of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD). They committed to provide seamless service and improve emergency response times. The BOS committed to coordinate future efforts to develop funding and fire protection service levels to equal status with the remainder of Bay Area communities. Seven years later there has been little progress, and the emergency response time still comes up short compared to response times prior to the ECCFPD formation.

There has been a significant reduction of equipment and resources available on Bethel Island following the formation of ECCFPD.

No proposed funding solution was suggested during the Grand Jury's investigation.

Major areas of concern regarding Bethel Island include the following:

- A portion of the fire fighting personnel is continually rotated without a formal orientation regarding the unique characteristics of the island.
- Fire hydrants are available in the business district. This area encompasses only about one-third of a mile of Bethel Island's community. At present they are not functional. There are approximately 7 miles of heavily populated roads that must rely on trucked in water.
- Surrounded by water, Bethel Island has no readily available water to fight fires.
- In addition to the water available on the fire trucks and local private pumps, fire fighting water is brought in by tanker trucks or drafted (pumped) from the Delta.
- The fire house has been condemned due to mold infestation.

## BACKGROUND

There have been a number of fires and medical emergencies that bring into question whether the new East Contra Costa Fire Protection District is performing adequately. These instances, coupled with news articles and citizen's complaints, triggered an investigation by the Grand Jury in July, 2008.



On September 8, 2008, 54 firefighters and 18 trucks battled a fire on Bethel Island. The fire involved the destruction of two houses located next to Taylor Slough levee. Immediate access to the levee was delayed due to confusion over the location of the keys that would provide vehicle access. A steel cable eventually had to be cut before equipment could be properly positioned to draft water from the Delta. The appropriate keys were subsequently located in one of the fire trucks. An image of one of the destroyed homes is shown on the next page. (Picture courtesy of Glenn Peck).



(Picture courtesy of Glenn Peck)

Bethel Island is an unincorporated community in the extreme eastern portion of Contra Costa County. The community has a number of small businesses and about 2,400 residents. The island contains about 3,500 acres of reclaimed lands, over 95% of which lie below sea level. It is protected by a man-made levee. The levee is 11.5 miles in length and defines the outer perimeter of the island. Bethel Island Bridge is the only vehicular access to the island.



Aerial view of Bethel Island

Delta Coves, a new sub-division, has completed most of its required infrastructure. Numerous economic issues have delayed the development of the project indefinitely. This new development could add approximately 500 new homes, 50 condominiums, a club house, a new fire house and other amenities. Although fire hydrants are in place, a source of water will have to be acquired prior to any further construction.



Delta Coves, a partially developed subdivision on Bethel Island without water to the fire hydrants

Fire protection and medical assistance were provided at one time by volunteers. Subsequently there was a paid Fire Chief, an Assistant Chief, and a communications technician. The paid full time personnel were reduced by eliminating the Assistant Chief position during 1993-1994. The number of volunteers at that time varied from 15 to 35 people.

During the 1990's it became apparent that the primarily volunteer fire department of Bethel Island could not comply with State and Federal public safety regulations. The two water boats were aging. The level of service relative to wild fire abatement was dropping and for any given fire, zero to 15 volunteers would show up.

A county study determined that a consolidated fire district made up of nine fire stations within seven communities, including Bethel Island, would provide a better solution. The ECCFPD was formed in 2002.

One issue critically separating each community is the division of property taxes allocated for fire protection. Each community has a different rate; the lowest is 6 cents per dollar and the highest 16 cents per dollar.

## FINDINGS

### Fire Department Staffing, Facilities, and Equipment Prior to the Formation of ECCFPD.

1. Bethel Island had 15 to 35 active volunteer fire fighters who were paid on-call.
2. It became increasingly difficult to use volunteers because of changing standards and fire fighting techniques.
3. Prior to the formation of ECCFPD, fire fighting equipment consisted of two fire engines for fighting structural fires, two designated for grass and brush fires, two fire boats (converted recreational vessels), at least one water tender, and a rescue unit.
4. The Volunteer Fire Department was composed of residents of Bethel Island who were knowledgeable regarding the unusual pattern of roads, street names, and points of access.
5. In the 1970s, salaried staff consisted of a Fire Chief, an Assistant Chief, and a communications technician. In 1993-94 the Assistant Chief position was eliminated.
6. The salaried full time personnel were basically day time with a variable number of volunteers available after hours and weekends. Usually, some personnel were on site 24 hours per day 7 days per week.
7. Just prior to the formation of the ECCFPD, it became difficult to maintain an acceptable level of service.

### Fire Department Staffing, Facilities, and Equipment After the Formation of ECCFPD.

8. The ECCFPD was formed in September of 2002. The new District was a consolidation of three dependent Districts in the eastern part of Contra Costa County, Bethel Island, East Diablo and Oakley. The consolidation resulted in nine fire stations within seven communities<sup>1</sup>, including Bethel Island and other unincorporated areas.
9. The BOS application to the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) for the consolidation of East County fire departments to form the ECCFPD contained the following: ***“It is the intention of the Board of Supervisors to unify the three districts into a single district that will provide seamless service in a way that will enhance the emergency response network within projected revenues. It is also intended to coordinate future efforts to develop funding and fire protection service levels to equal status with the remainder of Bay Area communities.”***

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<sup>1</sup> Bethel Island, Oakley, Knightsen, Brentwood, Byron, Discovery Bay, and Marsh Creek-Morgan Territory area

10. According to ECCFPD, fire fighting procedures for Bethel Island are as follows: At the first alarm, one engine and two firefighters will be dispatched to the fire. Simultaneously, a fire engine will be sent to cover the Bethel Island station from a nearby community. If necessary, reserve fire fighters can be called to provide additional support.
11. Following the formation of ECCFPD, fire fighting equipment and resources no longer available on Bethel Island are:
- two fire engines for grass and brush fires,
  - two fire boats that were converted from recreational vessels,
  - one water tender,
  - the volunteer fire fighters.
- The current complement of equipment and resources located at Bethel Island are two fire engines and two fire fighters and a contracted rescue unit.
12. ECCFPD recently acquired a state-of-the-art fire boat, which uses a two to three-person crew. This boat is on call for all of Contra Costa County and surrounding waterways. Therefore, it may or may not be available at any given time because of its coverage area. If the boat is required to fight a fire, firefighters from one of the responding fire engines could board the boat at the scene to achieve the needed crew size.



A recently acquired state-of-the-art fire boat for use in Contra Costa County

13. The ECCFPD has stated that fire trucks have a shorter response time than a boat. For that reason the fire boat is not the primary piece of fire fighting equipment.
14. Currently, Bethel Island fire station is staffed with six firefighters (2 per shift). Four are relatively long term. The remaining two firefighters are rotated in from elsewhere in the District.
15. ECCFPD has contracted with American Medical Response (AMR) to provide three paramedics who are shared throughout the District. One paramedic is stationed at Bethel Island.

16. The system required to keep the water flowing to the business district hydrants failed in 2006 and has not been repaired or replaced. The pipes are old and in questionable condition. This pumping system, if operational, would provide water to service the business district. In addition to the 1,250 gallons of water available on the fire trucks, and local private working pumps, water to fight fires is brought in by tanker trucks or drafted (pumped) from the Delta. The Grand Jury was unable to determine the ownership of the pump and hydrants.



Abandoned Pump Intended for Fire Protection of Bethel Island's Business District



Abandoned switch meter box for pump, and an unused corroded fire hydrant in the business district

17. Water Tenders (Water Trucks) brought from off of the island must be used to replace the inoperable water hydrants. The water supply is limited.

18. There are private wells and water systems on Bethel Island, but with few exceptions they do not provide water for fire protection.

19. Prior to the formation of ECCFPD in 2002, there were approximately 450 calls per year on Bethel Island with an average response time of slightly more than 6 minutes.
20. After the consolidation, the actual response time was recorded at approximately 10 minutes. A 2006 report by Citygate Associates showed that ECCFPD response times should be 5 minutes.
21. Between November 1, 2007 and November 30, 2008, Fire District logs indicate average response times for fires were more than 8 minutes.



The Fire House photographed in the 1940s and in February 2009. This fire house has been condemned and will be replaced in the near future. The two trucks currently assigned to Bethel Island have water capacities of 500 and 750 gallons of water. If needed, additional water must be brought in by tanker trucks.

22. The fire station is uninhabitable due to the presence of mold. This requires the leasing of temporary facilities for the housing of personnel. Only firefighting equipment is permitted in the existing building. When permits are issued, it will be demolished.
23. ECCFPD firefighter's wages and benefits are the lowest in Contra Costa County.
24. The District provides no formal training of personnel regarding the confusing street patterns, names, and terrain of Bethel Island.
25. The ECCFPD provides no formalized performance evaluations or objectives related to all fire fighting personnel.
26. Delta Coves has most of its infrastructure requirements completed. Economic issues have delayed the development of the project indefinitely. Although fire hydrants are in place, a source of water will have to be acquired prior to any construction.
27. The ECCFPD Fire Chief reports to the BOS and the County Administrator.
28. The ECCFPD encompasses portions of Supervisorial Districts Three and Five.

## **Recommendations**

1. Establish an oversight commission, as was done during the formation of the ECCFPD. The commission could assist in managing funding issues, determine future resources (equipment, personnel or fire stations), determine areas of risk, recommend the establishment of response time goals, improve local control, and reduce perceived inequities as they pertain to Fire District decisions.
2. That ECCFPD provide formal orientation training specific to Bethel Island for all District fire fighters.
3. That ECCFPD complete a risk assessment of all areas of the District and establish an acceptable level of risk for each area to include response-time goals established for each area. Measurements shall be taken and compared to goals. The District shall develop objectives based on existing available resources.
4. That ECCFPD develop a cost comparison of various options to provide additional water supply for fire use on Bethel Island. Suggestions include but are not limited to:
  - strategic placement of water tanks, and/or
  - provide a method to move Delta water to the land side.
5. That the BOS work in cooperation with the Fire District to ensure that the objectives of ECCFPD are part of the decision making process as the Bethel Island Delta Coves project progresses.

## **Required Responses:**

### **Findings:**

**Contra Costa Board of Supervisors: 1 through 28**

**East Contra Costa Fire Protection District: 1 though 8 and 10 through 28**

### **Recommendations:**

**Contra Costa Board of Supervisors: 1 through 5**

**East Contra Costa Fire Protection District: 1 through 5**