

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

CORONA: Fire Department adjusts for cuts

Officials have eliminated one fire truck and have fewer firefighters to send out on calls



LESLIE PARRILLA/STAFF PHOTO

Corona Fire Department is losing the use of a ladder truck that's being put into storage because of recent budget cuts.

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Some Corona residents could be waiting longer for backup responses to structure fires and ultimately see more property damage after budget cuts to the department have left fewer firefighters and eliminated one fire truck.

"Everybody has to work harder... "We're just going to have to be a lot more aggressive in asking for mutual aid," said newly promoted Corona Fire Chief John Medina.

The department recently cut \$2.3 million from its \$21 budget for fiscal 2012-13 by leaving 11 positions vacant that had been lost through retirements and attrition, making concessions during salary and benefit negotiations, changing some department operations and demoting a captain to a battalion chief.

One of two ladders trucks was taken out of service Jan. 29, and the other is being moved to Station 1 on Magnolia to be more centrally located in the city. The bay doors at that station are being widened this month to accommodate the new six-wheeled resident.

Inside, firefighters cleared bathroom space and brought in additional beds and chairs for four new roommates after positions were shifted to accommodate the losses.

The cuts are going to hamper some of the department's responses but response times shouldn't be affected and the department isn't planning to close any of the city's seven fire stations, Medina said.

But they will mean fewer firefighters will be sent to initial structure fire calls.

"We actually have less people on the first response. We used to send 21 people to a first-alarm structure fire. Now we send 19," Medina said.

The department hasn't had layoffs since 2008 but continues leaving vacant positions empty to avoid handing

out pink slips.

Losing the ladder truck means structure fires that were normally fought with both ladder trucks will have one.

"They're used every day. We deploy them on reinforced responses, structure fires, heavy rescues. They serve a vital role in the work we do," Medina said of trucks that carry specialized equipment, ladders and have the ability to fight structure fires from a higher position.

If needed, mutual aid from the county or a neighboring city could be called in and the Corona truck could be pulled from its reserve status and staffed with on-call firefighters.

If a separate call needs a ladder truck, it would have to wait, call for mutual aid or firefighters would try to free it earlier from the call.

Despite the cuts and downsizing the department to 117 employees, the city recently created a new full-time position for former Corona Fire Chief David Waltemeyer who stepped down last month after serving since July 2008. He is now the city's emergency manager at a monthly salary of \$11,442.

Corona City Manager Brad Robbins has said the move would not cost the city additional money because Medina's former position was not being filled and Waltemeyer's salary was reduced to that of a battalion chief's.