

FRIDAY, February 14, 2025

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Residents rally for fire trucks



Chief says all of town is safe

BY BRADEN CARTWRIGHT
Daily Post Staff Writer

Fire Chief Geo Blackshire yesterday reassured residents that his department is taking a systemic, data-driven approach to emergency responses, but the loudest applause of the night was for a retired firefighter who implored the city to put an engine at every station.

“It’s about time that we spend the money and get fire protection full-time in this city,” retired fire Capt. Chris Jackson said.

Fire Station #4, at the corner of

E. Meadow Drive and Middlefield Road, has been without an engine since July 2020 due to pandemic-era budget cuts.

More and more residents have learned about the absence in recent weeks, and a petition to bring back the engine had 420 signatures last night.

In response, Blackshire had a community meeting down the street at the Mitchell Park Community Center with Mayor Ed Lauring and City Manager Ed Shikada. Blackshire said the city aims to respond to 90% of calls in less than eight minutes using a program that predicts where calls come in based on historical data.

“There’s no particular part of the

[See FIRE, page 34]

ALL GATHERED — About 100 people attended last night’s meeting about fire response in south Palo Alto. Post photo by Braden Cartwright.

THE UPDATE

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CORRECTION: Due to incomplete information, an article in yesterday’s Post was inaccurate. The owner of Bistro Vida wants the 600 block of Santa Cruz Avenue in Menlo Park to remain closed to cars.

TARIFF PLAN SIGNED: President Trump has rolled out his plan to increase U.S. tariffs to match tax rates that other countries charge on imports. Most economists say the tariffs would effectively be a tax increase on U.S. consumers. Trump says he’s decided he’ll charge reciprocal tariffs.

FUN OR STRESSFUL: Some U.S. adults consider Valentine’s Day outdated, according to a new AP poll [See THE UPDATE, page 4]

Bill for math test increases

BY BRADEN CARTWRIGHT
Daily Post Staff Writer

The Palo Alto Unified School District is bringing in an outside company to develop tests that middle schoolers can take to skip a level in math.

The district will pay WestEd \$373,015 to develop and analyze tests for three years, building on \$190,399 worth of work from last year.

“This process may be a little expensive, but it’s pretty accurate. It really properly serves our community, again because it’s a high stakes test,” said Guillermo Lopez, associate superintendent of education services.

Palo Alto is unique because middle school students take four levels of math in three years, Lopez told the board on Tuesday.

A skip test developed by WestEd allows students to do five levels of math in three years, Lopez said.

Before bringing in WestEd, teachers “worked tirelessly” to develop their own skip test.

“Despite this dedication, we received complaints about the test integrity, the expertise of teachers,” Lopez said.

[See MATH, page 34]

Council removes absentee commissioner

BY BRADEN CARTWRIGHT
Daily Post Staff Writer

Los Altos City Council has voted to remove Commissioner Yong Yeh from the Parks, Arts, Recreation and Culture Commission because he’s missed too many meetings.

Yeh wanted to stay on the PARC Commission and said he was a victim of a schedule that was picked by former members of the Arts Commission.

Council in June 2023 merged the Parks Commission and the Arts Commission to form the new PARC Com-

mission, which Mayor Pete Dailey has described as “toxic.”

Yeh, 45, came from the Parks Commission and said he was greatly outnumbered by four members of the Arts Commission, who changed meetings

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ABSENTEE

from Wednesday to Tuesday nights. Yeh told council that Tuesday nights are typically reserved for his wife to volunteer and for his daughters to go to ballet.

“That being said, I no longer have those scheduling conflicts and am fully able to attend regularly moving forward,” Yeh said. “Rather than looking backward, I hope we can focus on what comes next and how we can work together to get PARC back on track.”

Understands role

Yeh, who grew up across the street from Blach Intermediate School, said he understands a commissioner’s role is to act as a connection between council and the public, and not to push a personal agenda.



YEH

“I don’t see being commissioner as some springboard to some other role. All I want to do is serve on the commission and make my city better,” Yeh said.

But council members said they needed to be consistent. Yeh missed three out of four meetings in 2023 and five out of 10 meetings last year.

Commissioners are expected to attend no less than 75% of meetings, their handbook says.

“We cannot set an example where one commissioner can come and say, ‘I’ve been bad at attendance for two years but I’ll be good now,’” Councilwoman Sally Meadows said.

One ally

Yeh had an ally in Councilman Jonathan Weinberg, who was on the Parks Commission with Yeh for two years.

“He really is dedicated to the commission,” Weinberg said. “It just doesn’t make any sense to me why we would make the commission have more challenges, so the commission is more likely to struggle.”

Council discussed the PARC Commission’s “culture of no” at a meeting on Jan. 28.

Commissioners had a work plan last year with 22 tasks, such as assessing the use of new dog parks and issuing a call for public art. But they only completed four tasks, a report by Parks and Recreation Director Manny Hernandez said.

Commissioners spent seven meetings talking about art on the steps to the council chambers.

Contentious board

“They have shown disrespect for staff. The commission has shown disrespect for each other,” Mayor Pete Dailey said. “The meetings last ridiculously long, and they don’t take up the issues that council has specifically asked them to take up ... We need a full reset.”

Dailey was ready to disband the commission, but the rest of council wanted to address issues at a joint meeting first.

With Yeh gone, the PARC Commission has two vacancies and five members: Janet Corrigan, Terri Couture, Jeanine Valadez, Teresa Morris and David Young.

FIRE

city that’s safer than the other,” he said.

Residents had questions about delays caused by engines crossing the train tracks and future apartments planned at the southern end of the city.

Resident Penny Ellson said she’s worried during construction, pointing to an eight-alarm fire that tore through apartments going up next to Redwood City in June.

“That first response is critically important,” Ellson said.

No guarantee

Blackshire acknowledged that structures are vulnerable before sprinklers are installed. But he said in any area, there’s no guarantee that the local engine will be available.

“Sometimes we have engines going all the way across the city, and that’s why I try to put an empha-

sis on the system,” Blackshire said. Shikada said Fire Marshal Tamara Jasso ensures that new buildings are meeting strict building codes, and that’s why some developers complain about the slow “Palo Alto process.”

Fire Station #4 is getting rebuilt with five dorms and space for both an engine and an ambulance, Blackshire said.

Short-term plan

As a short-term measure, Shikada said he is recommending council add one position to the fire department on Feb. 24 so Fire Station #4 can have three firefighters at a time.

“We appreciate that this is an urgent issue,” Shikada said.

Depending on the call type, firefighters would choose to take out either an ambulance or an engine.

Blackshire said this model, called “cross-staffing,” isn’t perfect, but it’s a way to get an engine back at the station in 30 to 60 days.

An ambulance at the station is used 20% of the time, which means a fire engine would be available around 80% of the time, Blackshire said.

Adding one position will cost the city about \$1 million per year, Shikada said.

Other changes may come

Council can make more changes during budget discussions in May and June, Shikada said.

The city is estimating a \$10 million budget deficit because sales tax hasn’t rebounded as hoped for coming out of Covid, and the economy is volatile, Shikada said.

Joseph Penko, president of the local firefighter’s union, is against cross-staffing. He wants the city to man the engine with overtime shifts instead.

Neighbor understands fears

After the meeting, resident Ken Allen said he believes the city will listen because of the strong turnout.

“It’s pretty obvious that there is a lot of concern. We have over 100 people here. That’s unusual for a neighborhood meeting,” Allen said.

Allen said he grew up next to an Eichler in Marin County that burned down in 10 minutes, so he understands his neighbors’ fears. He was scared to watch the CZU Lightning Complex fires burning in the Santa Cruz Mountains in August 2020 and the destruction in Los Angeles last month.

“I hope it never happens here,” he said.

MATH

pez said. The district had “countless” meetings with parents asking if their students could re-take the test, Lopez said.

“This year we have zero. This proves the level of consistency when you compare WestEd with other programs,” Lopez said.

Critics against contract

Avery Wang and Edith Cohen, who have previously sued the district for allegedly holding students back in math, were against the WestEd contract.

Instead, Wang and Cohen want the district to use an existing test that’s free or nearly free and calibrated with millions of students each year.

Cohen compared the expense to a school district inventing its own school bus.

“This is a completely reckless way to spend the taxpayer money,” she said on Tuesday.

Wang said the district could use the money to pay the nonprofit DreamCatcher to provide after-school tutoring for hundreds of disadvantaged kids. The expense is the equivalent of 10% of PiE’s budget, which distributes \$5 million in parent donations to schools each year.

“This is fiscally suboptimal when free options are available,” Wang said on Tuesday.

Not meant for Palo Alto

But Lopez said the cheaper tests aren’t designed for Palo Alto’s unique program, and they don’t provide a complete picture of a students capabilities.

Board member Rowena Chiu asked a couple questions about how other districts do skip tests and

whether WestEd’s results can be compared to a free test’s results.

Lopez reiterated that Palo Alto’s math program is unique, and the board voted 5-0 to approve the contract through June 2027.

WestEd will create three test forms with 92 multiple choice questions and 63 free-response questions, the contract shows.

Third city OKs ouster measure

South San Francisco is the latest San Mateo County city to endorse Measure A, the ballot initiative that will allow the Board of Supervisors to remove embattled Sheriff Christina Corpus if passed by voters in a March 4 special election.

South San Francisco’s council voted 4-1, with Vice Mayor Mark Addiego against, to endorse the measure, joining Belmont and Redwood City.

Addiego voted against the endorsement. He said he is appalled by the situation in the Sheriff’s Office, but found the 400-page report to be lackluster and was skeptical that many of the allegations in the report came from one person.

“When I read this report, it reminded me of a daytime soap opera,” he said. “Everything that I read left me scratching my head.”

He questioned why Corpus has not been charged by District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe with any crime.

“Where is DA Wagstaffe? When are charges brought? If there’s some criminality here, why haven’t we heard from that?” he said.

Similar reasons across cities

Each council shared similar reasons for supporting Measure A, saying that the negative effects of a sheriff’s office in shambles trickle down to every city in the county.

“When the county’s law enforcement system is failing, it doesn’t just impact the sheriff’s department,” said Belmont Mayor Julia Mates.

Even though Belmont, Redwood City and South San Francisco have their own police departments, they still work closely with the Sheriff’s Office and rely on it for certain law enforcement services.

“Our police force closely interacts with the sheriff’s department,” said Redwood City Councilwoman Diane Howard during Monday’s city council meeting. “Our citizens may interact with sheriff’s department staff on the roads within Redwood City and in our unincorporated neighborhoods.”

Most council members from each city agreed that removing Corpus to prevent further disarray in the Sheriff’s Office is an urgent matter that cannot stall.

As for Corpus, she thinks that city councils should not be taking official stances on matters at the county level, she wrote in a statement.

“While collaboration between city and county leadership is essential to our shared success, it is both inappropriate and counterproductive for city officials to engage in politically motivated attacks on county matters — particularly against the highest elected law enforcement official in the county,” Corpus said.

Calls for resignation

Calls for Corpus to resign arose after a 400-page investigation into her administration was released in November, containing findings of abuse of power, retaliation, intimidation, homophobia and racism in her office.

The Board of Supervisors currently does not have the authority to remove the sheriff or any other elected official, so they moved to put it on the ballot and bring it to the voters.

The author of the investigative report into Corpus, retired Judge LaDoris Cordell, suggested that the sheriff resign.

“Lies, secrecy, intimidation, retaliation, conflicts of interest, and abuses of authority are all the hallmarks of the Corpus administration. Corpus should step down,” Cordell concluded in her report.