

Ben Lomond firehouse historic but outdated



Lauren Sagar/Sentinel

Chief John Charcho steps out of a truck at the Ben Lomond firehouse. With some of the rigs barely fitting into the station, Charcho worries that the district won't be able to purchase new, larger trucks in the future.

Residents may be asked to fund rebuild of community landmark

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Fire & Fire Protection

BEN LOMOND — The firehouse on Highway 9 — a community landmark, but one quickly slipping out of date — has Ben Lomond firefighters worrying it's too small to fit today's bigger, better fire trucks and that equipment storage has become a hazard.

And, if a major earthquake rocks the

Santa Cruz Mountains again, Ben Lomond Fire District officials are worried the 67-year-old station won't survive, rendering the life-saving equipment inside the building useless.

"If the fire station collapses, there will be no fire station in Ben Lomond," said Chief John Charcho.

Because of concern over the building and other issues, the fire district is reaching out to the community to ask its opinion

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and gather feedback on what, if anything, should be done about the station, built in 1940, Charcho said.

The seven-square-mile fire district includes about 4,500 residents.

"Do the citizens want us to take action now?" said Charcho. "The station is well-built, it's very impressive, but it doesn't meet modern safety standards and the

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'The station is well-built, it's very impressive, but it doesn't meet modern safety standards and the Americans with Disabilities Act.'

BEN LOMOND FIRE CHIEF JOHN CHARCHO



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Currently, fire gear is stored next to the trucks at the Ben Lomond firehouse, exposing them to unhealthy exhaust.

Firehouse

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Americans with Disabilities Act.”

For Carla Brennan of Ben Lomond, at the front desk at Santa Cruz Mountains Art Center on Wednesday afternoon, a nearly 70-year-old building doesn't seem that old. Then again, she said, she arrived in Ben Lomond from New England, where historical structures are more common.

Still, said Brennan, “the firefighting capabilities of the community should be a high priority.”

The district's other concerns include the height of the engine-room doors. At 108 inches high they're only a half-inch taller than the district's biggest engine — “It gives me chills every time I see that thing back in,” said Charcho — and would be too short for today's rigs, which are probably 6-8 inches taller than the station doors.

“You should be buying fire engines to meet the need in the community and the fire problem, not one that fits the doors,” said Charcho.

The district has four engines ranging from eight to 20 years old.

Another worry is the limited space in the apparatus room, which means protective equipment for the district's 38 volunteer firefighters is sitting right next to the fire engines.

“It's generally accepted that rigs should not be near equipment because diesel exhaust is a carcinogen,” said Charcho.

And the district could use a little more office space, he said.

Since Ben Lomond isn't an incorporated city, the fire station serves as a sort of unofficial city center and town hub, resident say.

“We meet there a lot. Our Christmas party is there,” said Thomas Wynn, president of the Ben Lomond Business Association. “They are our meeting place

and host a ton of events, they cook for us for our Evening in the Park, string our lights, take them down — they throw their weight behind everything we do.”

A firefighter even played Santa for the kids at Christmas, Wynn said.

The fire district sent a survey to residents in its last newsletter to help determine their priorities and gather feedback. The survey is also available on the district's Web site, at www.benlomondfd.com.

The district will hold public forums sometime down the line.

A parcel tax could be something the district pursues in the future, said Charcho. But for now, it wants to see what direction residents think it should go.

“We should do something,” said Charcho. “Either retrofit, build a new station, or I suppose the other option is do nothing. But that's not very responsible.”

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