Southern Marin fire board freezes 5% tax escalator

MEASURE U

District takes action to help ease financial impact from pandemic

By Loren zo Morotti

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The Southern Marin Fire Protection District is freezing a parcel tax increase to ease the financial strain on residents during the pandemic.

Measure U, a tax proposal passed by district voters in 2018, includes an automatic 5% annual increase unless the board intervenes. Measure U raised the parcel tax by $200 in response to California’s most destructive fire season in 2017, said Cathryn Hilliard, board president.

This year, the board asked the fire staff to craft a budget without the tax hike, Hilliard said.

“We are sensitive to people’s financial circumstances under COVID-19,” she said.

Fire Chief Chris Tubbs said the board passed the ordinance with a 6-0-1 vote, freezing the levy for the upcoming fiscal year.

The tax measure has raised about $3 million. About a third is $1 million dedicated to wildfire risk reduction efforts, and the rest is for maintaining cardiac and stroke survivability standards, emergency response times, adequate firefighter and paramedic staff levels, reliable fire prevention and life-saving equipment.

Tubbs said the loss of the 5% increase will cost the district about $150,000. He said the district does not plan any cuts to offset the loss.

“When Measure U was first being discussed in the community, before any vote was cast there was concern, as there is with any government agency, that the governing body would take fee escalation lightly,” Tubbs said. “In meetings I had with folks I reminded them the district has never taken auto escalators in past.”