

March 9, 2021

Ross Town Council
31 Sir Francis Drake Boulevard
Ross, California 94957
towncouncil@townofross.org

Re: Ross Town Council March 11, 2021 Agenda Item 11; Ross Fire Station and Town Facilities

Dear Ross Town Council:

My wife and I are members of the Ross Citizens for Responsible Development of Town Facilities. We live directly across the street from the Ross Fire Station and Town Hall. These are beautiful and iconic historical structures that frankly define Ross. It breaks our hearts to think that the Town is considering to tear them down and replace them with contemporary structures bearing no relationship to our town's style or history.

We wholeheartedly support retention of our own Ross Fire Station and upgrades to our Town Hall campus, all in their current protected historical style. Our Town staff, public safety personnel, and our residents deserve this. At the same time, we completely reject the notion that it will cost \$28.5 million (\$1857 PSF) to build a new police and fire station and administrative buildings. The City of Alamo, another Bay Area small town like Ross, recently faced a similar dilemma. The cost to replace their outdated fire station was budgeted at \$10 million, which the city could not afford. A new fire chief came in and he figured out how to build it for half the cost (see attached article). Ross can do the same.

Last week members of our citizen's group met at Town Hall with the architect for that Alamo firehouse project (LSA Architects). LSA has designed over 50 public safety facilities, most in the Bay Area. They reviewed the Ross Town Hall campus, and stated that the firehouse could be rebuilt (retaining its original historically protected façade and style) for \$750 PSF all in hard cost, plus 20%-25% soft costs. They felt police and town admin space could be rebuilt even cheaper, for \$550 PSF all in hard costs (plus soft costs). Ed Dong from our group has separately provided you an exhaustive line item budget showing we can complete Option 1 (all Town facilities rebuilt) for approximately \$16 million. We believe Town residents would support this level of expenditure to keep our firehouse, and with remodel vs. rebuild on some portions of the facility, that number can be trimmed substantially further. Our group has formed a citizen's task force of deeply experienced commercial real estate professionals who are ready to help the Town achieve this vision.

Were the Town to proceed with a vote on March 11 to eliminate our Ross firehouse, I anticipate serious CEQA problems. I am an experienced commercial real estate owner with extensive CEQA experience, having entitled and built major projects in Marin and the greater Bay Area, including the San Rafael Airport Indoor Sports Center, an 85,000 SF facility that took 6 years and a \$1 million EIR to get approved (opening this summer!). I can tell you from hard earned, first-hand experience that if the Town Council decides to vote to eliminate our fire station without appropriate process, due diligence and transparency, the Town of Ross will face two significant environmental impacts that will result in substantial delay and costs to the project.

First, the Town's fire safety consultants have warned that closing our firehouse and contracting fire response to Ross Valley Fire District will add a MINIMUM of 2 minutes to our average fire response time. A two minute delay is huge in firefighting! In modern homes with open floor plans

and plastic composite materials and furnishings, once a flame ignites, you only have 3 minutes to safely get out (compared to 17 minutes in 1970). Videos show that flashover (instant combustion of furnishings, walls, ceilings) occurs within 2.5 minutes of first flames. Fire departments around the country obsess about shaving 15 seconds off their response times. That Town Council and staff have brushed aside the added delay and are blithely contemplating adding 2+ minutes to our Ross response time is frankly shocking. And this does not even take into account the additional response time delays due to new simultaneous calls for service that the nearby fire stations will experience at least twice per week (according to Town's own reports) if Ross terminates its fire services.

National Fire Protection Association 1710 sets a standard for 6 minute total average response time. Ross's fire response time is currently at 7 minutes and 55 seconds. Adding 2+ minutes will absolutely be considered a non-mitigatable significant environmental impact under CEQA. This fact alone will require extensive and time consuming expert studies to evaluate the added risks to the health and safety of Ross residents, their property, and the environment. At the end of it, you, the Town Council, will be required under CEQA to adopt a Finding of Overriding Consideration in order to approve closing our fire house and moving fire services out of Town. With only 20% of Ross homes having automatic fire sprinkler systems, and risks of wildfire striking our hills growing every year, is that a finding and decision the council members will be willing to make? It is not a decision that I would want to be making if I were on the Town Council.

Second, the Ross firehouse and Town Hall complex are listed on the California Historic Registry. Altering or demolishing them, as contemplated by all 4 options currently under consideration by the Town, is specifically listed under CEQA as a significant environmental impact and cannot be accomplished without an EIR and compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and its Section 106 process. There is a CEQA exemption for replacement of public safety facilities, but that does not apply to historic structures listed on the California Historic Registry. Again, this will be a costly and time consuming process involving expensive expert consultants and I guarantee the historic preservation groups will come out in droves to fight you. This is certainly not the way to go if we want to get something done soon at a responsible total cost to Ross residents.

Fortunately there's a better, simpler, cheaper way to keep our firehouse while upgrading and expanding our Town Hall campus. The path has already been laid out by Alamo and other small Bay Area towns that simply didn't have the money for an unlimited budget of wish list items and expensive consultants, designers, and project managers. We need to make responsible, cost effective choices that deliver basic public safety and admin services, within simple yet historically accurate building facades. Ross Citizens for Responsible Development of Town Facilities has formed a volunteer advisory task force of experienced real estate development and construction professionals to help guide the Town to achieve this truly win/win vision for our Town staff, public safety personnel, and our residents. We thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of this critical matter.

Best Regards,

Bob Herbst

7 Laurel Grove Avenue

Task Force Member

Ross Citizens for the Responsible Development of Town Facilities

Alamo welcomes new fire station

\$4.9M station is modernized, aims to improve emergency response time

by [Erika Alvero](#) /

Uploaded: Mon, Oct 30, 2017, 5:26 pm

After over six years of planning and constructing, Alamo's new Fire Station 32 is officially open and running.

At a grand-opening ceremony on Saturday, members of the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, local dignitaries, the design and construction teams and community members came out to celebrate the new station at the corner of Stone Valley Road and Miranda Avenue.

"We as a district are so honored to provide service to this community, and we think this represents it in a much better way than the other station, although what really what matters is the people coming out of the station," fire chief Paige Meyer said during the ceremony. "But this is going to be a big upgrade for the community."

The nearly 8,000 square-foot station at 2100 Stone Valley Road includes six dormitories, a gym, a kitchen and living room area (the "family room," according to firefighter Tom Terrazas). The project cost the fire district a little under its budget of \$5 million, funded through a certificate of participation -- debt-financing similar to a bond -- with a net-zero impact on their budget, according to Meyer.

The station houses two engines and one ambulance, and 15 members of the fire district will call it home, with five on duty at all times.

Being situated at a corner with access to two through-streets is a key advantage, according to [district officials](#), in terms of controlling the light signals at the intersection, as well as the station's location at the center of the Alamo response zone.

At the grand opening, which took place from 10 a.m. until noon, three extra engines were set up, to demonstrate the station's capacity for additional apparatus should the need arise. A CPR station was set up as well, where attendees could practice hands-only CPR on mannequins, with instruction.

A variety of people involved with the project took the stage to speak, including Supervisor Candace Andersen, a representative from State Sen. Steve Glazer's office, a representative from LC Architects, builders from Pacific-Mountain Contractors of California, Inc. (PMC), a few members of the fire board and two representatives from the Alamo Improvement Association.

"The opening of this state-of-the-art facility will improve fire district crew emergency response time...in Alamo and the surrounding communities," said Judy Lloyd, representing Glazer's office.

The ceremony concluded with the official ribbon-cutting, and the children present placing a time capsule in the ground by the station's flagpole -- to be dug up in 100 years.

This new station site was [initially approved](#) by the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors in 2011, under the tenure of then-fire chief Richard Price. It was proposed in order to replace the previous Station 32 located right down the street at 1101 Stone Valley Road -- the smallest and oldest of the district stations, having opened on November 1958.

When Meyer took the reins as chief in 2013, however, he temporarily halted the project in order to re-evaluate the scope and design of the project, which was expected to cost over \$10 million in a time of financial difficulties.

"When I came into office in 2012 it had already been approved," Andersen recalled. "But when Paige came in as chief he took a step back, and said, 'Let's make sure we're doing this the right way, let's make sure we're fiscally responsible in how we're going to build this. Maybe we can work with the neighbors a little bit more to shrink the footprint to make it something that really works for this neighborhood.' And that's what they did."

Construction officially broke ground on the new site February 2016, and it has been up and running since July this year.

"All these folks in our community, in different areas of government, worked very hard on making sure that this process, that we got through it," Meyer said. "Everybody deserves a lot of credit, and I can't be prouder of the effort of my staff."

