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Feinstein criticizes fire planning for region

Senator urges city, county to add manpower, stations**By Tony Manolatos**

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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City and county leaders need to do a better job preparing for the type of firestorms that devastated the region last month, even if that means raising taxes, Sen. Dianne Feinstein said yesterday at a public hearing she chaired at San Diego City Hall.

If changes aren't made quickly, Feinstein warned the result could be "a loss of life on a major scale."

Feinstein, D-Calif., was joined by Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley, and Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego. The federal lawmakers are trying to correct problems that surfaced during the October wildfires.

About a dozen people testified, including San Diego City Council President Scott Peters, county Supervisor Ron Roberts and former San Diego fire chief Jeff Bowman.

The 3½-hour hearing opened with Feinstein criticizing the city and the county. Feinstein said the city doesn't have enough firefighters or fire stations. She said San Diego County is one of the largest in California without a unified fire department.

Peters pointed out that voters have twice refused to pay for more fire protection. Feinstein suggested "the third time might be the charm."

"I think people now see this is a pattern, and everything they hold dear could go," she said.

What seemed to trouble Feinstein most was finding out that the fire station in Rancho Bernardo is responsible for protecting 24 square miles. Standards set by the National Fire Protection Association, which accredits departments across the country, say a station shouldn't cover an area larger than 9 square miles.

All of the 365 homes burned in San Diego last month were in Rancho Bernardo. Most were destroyed, which Feinstein said indicates that firefighters didn't get in.

"Obviously, the fire wasn't fought there," she said.



K.C. ALFRED / Union-Tribune
Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., said yesterday that more firefighting resources are necessary to prevent "a loss of life on a major scale."

She asked Peters if an additional fire station in the area would have helped. Peters said the city is trying to answer that question.

At least four stations – in Paradise Hills, Tierrasanta, La Jolla and University City – cover areas larger than 9 square miles, fire officials said.

The National Fire Protection Association has set a five-minute response goal for firefighters. In Rancho Bernardo, the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department meets or exceeds that goal 37 percent of the time. Across the city, the department meets or exceeds that mark 47 percent of the time.

In Mission Valley, an area lined with strip malls and office buildings, firefighters have trouble responding to 911 calls within 10 minutes, Fire Chief Tracy Jarman testified.

Some municipalities in the county steer more resources to fire protection than San Diego.

In Escondido, for example, five fire stations cover 50 square miles. In Chula Vista, nine stations defend approximately 52 square miles, although there has been talk of closing one of those stations due to budget concerns.

After the 2003 wildfires, the National Fire Protection Association studied the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department to see if it qualified for accreditation. It didn't.

The city needs at least 20 additional fire stations, the association said. It would cost about \$100 million to build and staff the stations, and \$40 million a year to run them.

Since the 2003 wildfires, two stations have been built, including a temporary structure at the Qualcomm Stadium parking lot. A third station is expected to open in January in Carmel Valley.

Money, or a lack of it, has been the biggest stumbling block. San Diego is hamstrung by a mountain of debt and other financial problems that have made borrowing money an expensive exercise.

The fire department has a \$181 million annual budget, up from \$171 million a year ago. If the stations were built, about 240 firefighters would be hired to join the 924 men and women who staff 46 stations.

But that still wouldn't be enough manpower to turn back firestorms like those that burned across the county last month, department spokesman Maurice Luque said.

“It's unfair to put the onus of solving all the fire protection issues on the backs of the city,” Luque said. “This is a regional issue that's going to take state and federal support to resolve.”

Luque said the lack of personnel isn't nearly as worrisome as the lack of fire engines.

“We had firefighters trying to sneak on engines because there weren't enough,” he said.

As much as Feinstein would like to see more resources in the city, she said she's just as concerned about the county's decision not to form a regional fire department.

During the hearing, when Roberts interrupted the senator and said he had a suggestion, Feinstein pointed at him, smiled and took a playful stab.

“Like a county fire department in your district?” she said.

Roberts, chairman of the board of supervisors, has said he is reluctant to focus on that goal because of resistance from several rural fire protection districts.

However, he said he is interested in improving the use of military aircraft, which barely got off the ground during the first two days of last month's fires. He also wants Cal Fire, the state agency, to use more military technology to gauge the direction and magnitude of wildfires. And Roberts said he would like military assets to arrive before the fires start, instead of days afterward.

Roberts also expressed interest in an idea that Bowman, the former fire chief, raised at the hearing. Bowman suggested that the county buy 50 fire engines and spread them among the fire departments.

After the meeting, Roberts said he'll take the first step toward making such a purchase in the next two weeks and ask the board to approve a proposal to review funding options and legal obligations. Roberts said it's possible that federal funding could be used. It's an idea he plans to discuss further with Feinstein.

"It doesn't necessarily hinge on federal funding, but she seems determined to assist in making some changes, and I'm delighted with that," Roberts said.

Bowman, who resigned 18 months ago as San Diego's fire chief, in part because he couldn't get more resources, reminded Feinstein that the two of them were members of the Blue Ribbon Commission formed after the 2003 wildfires to determine what needed correcting. The commission came up with dozens of recommendations, but several suggestions were only partially implemented or ignored.

One called for adding 150 engines to Cal Fire's fleet. To date, 19 have been ordered.

"This is like déjà vu – we have these meetings, but nothing happens," Bowman said. "What needs to happen here is action."

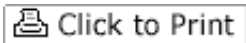
Feinstein thanked Bowman for his candor.

"Now the challenge will be to see whether there is the leadership to take us where we need to be," she said.

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