

# Fig Garden residents will vote whether to keep Fresno city fire station

By Marc Benjamin

Residents are voting on the Fig Garden fire station. THEFRESNOBEE

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- *Residents will decide the fate of the Fig Garden fire station.*
- *Tuesday night is the deadline for voters to turn in their ballots.*
- *Votes will be counted Tuesday night 4/14 by an independent firm.*



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Ten years ago, Fig Garden residents voted to put Fresno city firefighters at the Fig Garden Fire Protection District station in the middle of one of Fresno's oldest neighborhoods, but that could soon change.

Residents are voting now whether to continue that relationship. In 2005, they voted to assess themselves more than \$500 per parcel annually to keep the fire station open. The parcel tax now is \$732 — having risen under an annual cost-of-living increase — and unlike the last election, when 56% of voters approved the city service, two-thirds approval is required this time.

Residents have until Tuesday night to mail or hand in their ballots at the Wishon Avenue fire station. Ballots will be placed in a secure box until they are counted that evening by a Southern California firm.

The old Fig Garden neighborhood is a county island with a fire protection district that has been in place since 1942. In 2005, residents voted to end their relationship with Fresno County Fire Protection District because the nearest fire stations for assistance were in northeast Clovis or southeast Fresno.

Fresno City Fire Department added a firefighter and provided mutual aid from stations closer to Fig Garden, but more than doubled the assessment. Property owners in the district voted 148-118 to accept the assessment. Not every property owner voted — there are 735 parcels in the area, of which 696 have homes. Since state voters passed Proposition 26 in 2010, most parcel fees now require two-thirds voter approval, and the Fig Garden district falls under that provision.

Vernie Rogers, chairwoman of the district's board, said she views the two-thirds vote as a potential obstacle.

"We would like to keep the fire station intact in the neighborhood, but we see both sides of it — it comes down to money," Rogers said.

Opponent Barbara Dunn owns three parcels and her annual assessment exceeds \$2,000. She is encouraged that it a two-thirds vote is required for passage this time around.

"It's just too much," Dunn said of her assessments. "But, nobody is going to starve if this passes."

In 2014, the Fig Garden and other stations responded to 122 calls in the neighborhood. Fig Garden firefighters responded to nearly all of them.

But, Dunn said, the neighborhood's firefighter calls equate to one every three days. Fig Garden firefighters responded to a total of 1,853 calls, so neighborhood calls represented 6.6% of the station's responses, she said.

When the transition began in 2006, the city raised the yearly assessment for fire service from \$230 to \$529, but the station also was no longer exclusively for the neighborhood.

"You can't be unreasonable and think they will just serve the neighborhood," Rogers said. "This is a full-service organization and they have to answer to calls outside the district."

The firefighters are part of the fabric of the neighborhood, she said. Their presence goes well beyond medical aid and putting out blazes. They regularly assist residents and help in community events, she said.

"The firefighters are very engaged with the neighbors," Rogers said.

Having the fire station close by also serves as security for elderly residents with health issues and owners of older homes, she said.

With large trees and heavy foliage, fast response times are important, Rogers said. Without a fire station in the immediate neighborhood, "response times will double."

If they vote to close the city station, residents will pay for the Fig Garden district's operation and fire services from other stations.

Insurance agent Steve Kelly, who insures homes in the Fig Garden area, said he expects the community's fire service rating to rise, but he doesn't expect that will cause most insurers to raise home insurance rates.

"It won't affect the rates because there is still a fire station within five miles," he said.

Fresno City Fire Chief Kerri Donis said the fire department serves at the will of the neighborhood. If the parcel fee doesn't pass, the city will continue to serve the neighborhood from other stations farther away. The nearest is Bullard and Channing avenues, about two miles northwest, or the station on Fresno Street, north of Barstow Avenue, about two miles northeast. Other stations are at Marks and Shaw avenues, Shields and Fresno Street and Fruit and Clinton avenues.

Donis said the city will consider a change its "deployment strategy" if the Fig Garden station closes.

She said the fire department is concerned about the types of responses necessary in case of a fire Old Fig Garden. She compares the response to what would be needed in a wildland response because of the trees and proximity of homes to one another.

For now, Donis said, the Fig Garden neighborhood has the fastest response times in Fresno.

Based on location of the stations, Donis said, the Fig Garden neighborhood could go from a 3 1/2 minute response time to 6 1/2 minutes. Life threatening fire damage can occur quickly: Catastrophic flash-over fire occurs in four minutes, and significant brain damage can occur after the same amount of time, she said. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of calls to the fire department are for medical needs.

"The faster we can reach an emergency, the more likely for us to have a positive outcome," she said.

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