

ENSURING ALL AREAS OF THE FIRE DISTRICT ARE WELL SERVED

By Supervisor Linda Parks, April 2009

The excellent service we receive from the Ventura County Fire Department and the level of skill and commitment of our professionals is exemplary. I've watched our Fire Chief, Bob Roper, expertly handle the media frenzy after the disastrous La Conchita landslides and making one of the most difficult decisions of his life -- to stop the search and rescue operations and begin recovery. I've seen the look on a firefighter's face when she once again held the baby that had stopped breathing, but because of her efforts was alive. I've seen the precision teamwork of fire crews protecting homes from wildfire, the water drops from helicopters that are on the spot in stopping a flare-up, and I've witnessed the late nights these professionals invest in community meetings to educate the public to be fire safe.

The Fire Department's mission is first and foremost the public's safety. When the question of service levels is broached, their answer is not political. When more service is needed, they respond. When a Thousand Oaks resident needs to be extricated from a car crash on the Conejo Grade, or crashes his ultralight airplane at Camarillo Airport, or when crews are sent to battle a brush fire in the Simi Hills that threatens Lang Ranch, the Fire District doesn't start the meter running on the City of Thousand Oaks.

Not surprisingly, a City of Thousand Oaks-commissioned study shows that not all property taxes from Thousand Oaks that go to the Fire District are used solely for fire services within the city. What is surprising, is the City study shows that amount of property taxes to be \$6 million annually, and the Fire District finds it may be closer to \$1.5 million. I've asked the Fire District to explain the discrepancy in the two figures because a \$4.5 million difference is a big difference. We need to have agreement on what the problem is before we can fix it, and taxpayers deserve to know how their tax dollars are being spent.

The City of Thousand Oaks' position that property owners in the city pay more property taxes and should receive more fire services will be reviewed by the Fire District when they report back to us on revenue and service levels in Thousand Oaks. It has always been the Fire District's objective to provide the highest levels of service possible. Examples include the recent upgrade of the Fire Dispatch Center and incorporation of Geographic Positioning System (GPS) on all our fire and ambulances so the closest resource to the emergency is the one that responds. Increased service efficiency, state of the art equipment, superior training, fire protection policies, and effective brush clearance zones, serve all areas in the Fire District well and makes Ventura County's Fire District a model nationwide.

The City had also requested that the County close down the Lake Sherwood Fire Station and build a new fire station across the street from Westlake Elementary School. While I can support the City's desire to increase service levels even though the Fire District finds there is no service vacuum in the Westlake Village area, it is important to me to make sure that it does not result in a reduction in public safety somewhere else.

I am keenly interested in ensuring all areas of the Fire District are well served, and cannot accept reductions in service to Lake Sherwood/Hidden Valley to levels that are below what is adequate. Like the Fire Department, elected officials need to make decisions based on public safety, not politics. I look forward to our District finding more ways to increase service, and making sure that decisions about funding and level of service are done transparently and fairly.