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Tuolumne County leaders prefer separate, smaller resilience centers



Deputy County Administrator Maureen Frank (far left) gives a presentation to the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors about the status of planning for the construction of one or two “community resilience centers” with design consultants Maynard Feist (center) and Mike Davey (far right), both of the Sacramento-based architectural firm Lionakis. (Alex MacLean / Union Democrat)

Tuolumne County is seeking places to build one or two “community resilience centers” that will be funded by \$16 million from the federal government for post-Rim Fire projects.

The Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a planning document Tuesday that will be used to solicit offers from property owners of potential sites in Groveland and the township of Tuolumne.

In January 2016, the state of California was selected to receive \$70 million through the first-ever National Disaster Resilience Competition for projects specifically intended to help Tuolumne County recover from the 2013 Rim Fire that burned 400 square miles of mostly forest land.

District 4 Supervisor John Gray, who represents Groveland, and District 3 Supervisor Evan Royce, who represents Tuolumne, both said they would rather see two smaller centers constructed in their respective communities as opposed to one larger center.

“It’s not realistic,” Gray said of the single, large center. “I think we do a better service to both communities by looking at the program based on two facilities.”

The centers are intended to be a place that can house evacuees during emergencies like the Rim Fire, as well as provide other uses that benefit the community throughout the year.

Lionakis Architects was hired to help the county see the project through the planning and design phase. The Sacramento-based firm also designed the new county jail that’s set to begin construction next year.

A series of public meetings were hosted in Groveland, Tuolumne and Sonora earlier this year to gather input about what the community wants to see in the design of the centers.

Deputy County Administrator Maureen Frank said the residents of Groveland focused more on gearing the center toward seniors, while those in Tuolumne were more focused on providing amenities for the younger generation.

Frank said both counties showed interest in a commercial kitchen and housing government services at the facility, such as a Tuolumne County Sheriff’s Office Community Services Unit or classrooms for job training.

Other ideas that were floated at the meetings included a gymnasium, daycare, offices, and large and small meeting rooms.

Lionakis determined the county could afford to build either one roughly 23,000-square-foot center, or two centers between roughly 8,700 and 9,200 square feet each.

John Feriani, of Tuolumne, said he attended all of the meetings and believes the center in Tuolumne needs to be located somewhere in the town's downtown area to help spur economic development.

Luci Tyndall, of Groveland, urged the board to include space in the designs for a possible expansion of the facility in the future.

Proposals from property owners will be due back to the county by Jan. 23, after which they will be evaluated and narrowed down before a final selection tentatively scheduled in October. The county aims to conclude the property transfer by June 2019 after completing an environmental impact study.

Frank said the goal is to complete construction by December 2021 and open the center by March 2022.

District 2 Supervisor Randy Hanvelt warned against getting too "euphoric" about the proposed centers before knowing what it will cost for ongoing operations and maintenance. Frank said an operational plan will be developed as part of the process.

Meanwhile, the California Department of Housing and Community Development is working with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy on other projects in the county funded by the rest of the \$70 million grant.

Other projects being funded by the grant include \$28 million for implementing a forest and watershed health program that will include reforestation of areas burned by the Rim Fire, thinning to prevent future wildfires and the creation of new fuel breaks across 1,940 acres.

They are also working on developing a \$22 million "biomass utilization facility" that will convert the biomass removed from the forest into energy and wood products.

County Administrator Craig Pedro called the \$70 million grant unprecedented in his 30-plus years of working for the county.

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