

Viewpoint

IDEAS, THOUGHTS AND OPINIONS ABOUT LOCAL ISSUES

Atherton shows how *not* to be a good neighbor

When Atherton leaders first began making noises about how the town was paying far more than “its share” in taxes to the fire district that serves it, and the possibility of detaching from the district as a result, it was almost inconceivable that the idea of such a separation would survive. Hard to believe that it wouldn’t die a quick, well-deserved death after town officials considered the consequences of such a detachment to the town and to the surrounding communities that are also served by the first-rate Menlo Park Fire Protection District.

The fact that not only has the idea survived, but that the town is paying tens of thousands of dollars to study and consider it is astounding. Even though two City Council members — first Elizabeth Lewis then Mayor Rick DeGolia — have shown the good sense to publicly oppose it, council members Cary Wiest, Mike Lempres and Bill Widmer insist on pursuing this folly.

The notion that Atherton taxpayers, who own some of the highest-valued property in the entire country, are somehow being abused by having to bear a higher proportion of the cost for emergency services in the wider community is absurd. And sad. It rejects the widely held principles of a just society, and the values that underpin the belief in a common good that ensures that all citizens — rich or poor, and everyone in between — are entitled to equal access to education, medical care and emergency services.

The argument of town officials who are pushing for this move is that property tax revenue from Atherton, whose residents make up 8% of the population served by the fire district, constitutes about 32% of the district’s property tax revenue. As a result, they assert, Atherton property owners “subsidize” emergency services for the district’s poorer communities, such as East Palo Alto, portions of Menlo Park and unincorporated areas. Those figures come from a consultant’s study, released in 2018, that considered merely the bottom line of tax contributions from Atherton versus the percentage of population served. Calculations based on such rudimentary information, with no consideration

of other factors that might be involved in providing emergency services to the town, make the figures suspect right out of the gate.

But aside from that, the premise that the wealthiest citizens of a wider community shouldn’t bear more of the financial burden to keep that community safe and healthy is one that should be soundly rejected by members of a commonwealth whose stability depends on strong institutions that support everyone.

After more than a year of discussing this misguided notion, which gained traction after the release of the costly consultant’s study, and of souring the relationship between the town and the fire district, the council majority appears unwilling to change course. But in January, Councilwoman Lewis showed the courage to question pursuit of detachment, and Mayor DeGolia, early this month, added his voice in opposition.

“I think that it is a waste of time and money to pursue detachment from the fire district,” he told *The Almanac*. “I don’t think that detachment would benefit Atherton residents because I believe that we get better service from (the Menlo Park fire district) than we could get from any alternative service provider” given the district’s history of service to the community.

Lewis and DeGolia are the voices of reason in this debate, and they deserve kudos from people who care about keeping their emergency services strong and their neighbors — even those without the abundance of resources enjoyed by the wealthiest residents of our greater community — safe. Atherton’s withdrawal from the district would severely impact the fire agency’s budget and the services it would be able to provide to the wider community.

Local resident Jim Lewis floated an idea that, if Atherton leaders can’t bring themselves to change course at this point, might be worth trying: Call upon a mediator to help the town and the fire district work through the questions surrounding the matter. This option would be less costly and, one would hope, more productive and less damaging to the relationship between the town and the fire district, which has taken a hit as the talk of detachment has dragged on. ■

EDITORIAL

The opinion of *The Almanac*

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