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RESIDENTS BURNED ABOUT PROPOSED FIRE STATION

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JOE FITZGIBBON - for The Oregonian

Fire officials often say that fire stations are difficult to place in a neighborhood, but once there nearly impossible to remove. The situation in the Sylvan-Highlands neighborhood might prove their case.

Dozens of residents oppose the Portland Fire Bureau's proposal to construct a new fire station on an empty lot at Southwest 57th Avenue and Barnes Road. Too many nearby homes, steep hills, narrow streets and public safety issues top the protesters' list of concerns.

"When people supported the (\$53 million) November ballot measure, I don't think they realized that they would be getting a fire station built this close to their homes," said Sally Kneuve, a member of the Sylvan-Highlands Neighborhood Association. "But, I think what upsets most people is that it appeared the Fire Bureau had made up its mind before they ever talked with anyone."

Opponents prefer building the \$1.2 million facility several miles away, near the interchange of U.S. 26 and the Sylvan overpass. Last month, they sent a list of eight preferred sites to the Fire Bureau for consideration.

"We've told them that we're not saying 'no' to a fire station. We just think that the Sylvan interchange makes better sense," Mike Sublett, president of the neighborhood association said. "Studies show that the No. 1 source of calls will be vehicle fires and injury accidents. That's where the vehicles and Max trains are located -- Highway 26."

Officials listened to suggestions from residents Tuesday night at a community meeting. But, by the end of the evening, they had nixed most of them.

According to Deputy Fire Chief Howard Boyte the Sylvan interchange offers more problems than solutions.

"We've looked at each of the proposals seriously, but they're too costly or will be greatly affected by the reconfiguration of the Sylvan interchange," Boyte said. "Since we own the property at 57th and Barnes, it is still our first choice."

Boyte added that the Barnes location, near West Burnside Street, will enable firefighters to respond to emergency calls within the targeted four- to six-minute range.

"We view coming down the ridgeline much more desirable than going back up the hills, especially in icy conditions," Boyte said. "But, we're still looking at all options."

To that end, planners are considering two other sites. One involves a land swap for adjacent property near the KOIN transmission towers, and the other requires an outright purchase of private property near Southwest Montgomery Street and Skyline Boulevard.

With little money in the bond measure set aside for acquisition of land, buying property seems unlikely, Boyte said.

Residents and fire officials agreed to meet again in March to continue discussions.

Portland Fire Chief Robert Wall said that large portions of Southwest Portland are underserved, and he called for starting construction on the new facility by this fall.

The two-story building, which would be one of the smaller fire stations, will house a single company of about five firefighters, one fire engine and a four-wheel, off-road vehicle. In addition to responding to emergencies and structural fires, the station will be available to contain grass fires.

The Fire Bureau expects to open another new station near Northeast 82nd Avenue and Prescott Street this year, and another near Southwest Skyline and Thompson Road within three years.

At least three current stations are scheduled for remodeling. They include Station No. 4 at Southwest College Street and Fifth Avenue; No. 22 in St. Johns and No. 41 at 1500 N.E. 122nd Ave.

Caption: Photo by PATRICIA CORDELL - of The Oregonian staff