



## **A Fire Department Dependent Upon a Corporation**

February 13, 2025

Moss Landing, Calif.

Funding issues and aging equipment plagued North County Fire for years. It was noted in a June 2021 Pajaronian article that the Moss Landing Power Plant “in the early 2000s, that large coastal property brought in roughly \$860,000 in tax revenue.” Board member Ramon Gomez would tell the Pajaronian in 2021 that the Moss Landing Power Plant “netted just \$142,000 for the district.” The steady decline of property tax revenues in the district forced North County Fire to “rely on grant funding to hire new firefighters and upgrade its rigs.” In 2019, five firefighters were let go when the department was unable to renew a grant.

In 2021, North County Fire would ask the voters to pass Prop 218, an Emergency Response Services Assessment. The estimated average assessment for a single-family parcel was reported to be \$97.91. North County Fire stated that it was unable to sustain staffing levels and if this bond was not passed it would have to “brownout” a fire station daily.

On the North County Fire website under Prop 218 FAQs there is only one question that pertains to the Moss Landing Power Plant.

**The largest battery storage facility in the world is being built on that site. Did the county have to give away property tax concessions to locate there? If not, wouldn't they pay similar property taxes?**

The District identified a funding shortfall in fiscal year 2019/20 and 2020/21 prior to receiving expected property tax revenue from the Moss Landing Battery Energy Storage project (MLPP). The District approached MLPP and asked for assistance with the funding gap. The MLPP agreed to fill the funding gap through a funding agreement between the MLPP and North County Fire District in the form of one-time payment(s) of \$300K per year, for a total of 2 years (FY 2019/20 and 2020/21). This funding gap was corrected to support the District’s ability to support the local community and the MLPP while it is being built. The MLPP is scheduled to be completed in late June of this year. It is important to point out that the funding is a temporary measure to help maintain the existing 22 personnel until such time as the MLPP property tax roll captures the project’s improvements and increases the property tax it generates. It is anticipated that the property tax revenue increase will be about \$300k per year. In short, we are already using this money through the funding agreement, and it will only help sustain the existing 22 firefighters that are currently on the payroll.



The voters would end up passing Prop 218, providing an estimated additional million dollars annually to North County Fire. Making quick use of the financial windfall from the assessment revenue, North County Fire hired seven new firefighters in March of 2022 but would forego obtaining the appropriate training and equipment to respond to a lithium-ion battery plant overheating event or a fire after incidents at the Vistra Moss Landing site in September 2021 and February 2022.

Less than a year later, in February of 2023, North County Fire hired five additional firefighters but would again forego obtaining the appropriate training and equipment to respond to a lithium-ion battery plant overheating event or a fire after a fire occurred at the PG&E Elkhorn battery storage facility in September of 2022.

Monterey County officials would later host a town hall on September 20, 2023, after three incidents at the Moss Landing Power Plant. The Pajaronian reported that, “The two-hour meeting in Castroville included Monterey County Supervisor Glenn Church, Senator John Laird, the Monterey County Administrative Office, North Monterey County Fire Protection, Pacific Gas and Electric and Vistra Energy Corporation.”

Supervisor Church was quoted as saying, “It's not just environmental – there's health issues,” after a fire at the power plant had forced the closure of Highway 1 and a shelter in place advisory for surrounding residences and businesses. Supervisor Church would also add, “That fire resulted in smoke containing a toxin being released that was harmful to neighboring areas.”

North County Fire Chief Joel Mendoza at the September 2023 town hall would instead praise Vistra and PG&E for doing “a great job in training with their local fire department.” Mendoza would add “we sat down with each one of the companies and have gone over each one of the incidents to overall help public safety.”

Less than a year and a half later January 16, 2025, Vistra's MOSS 300 would be overtaken by thermal runaway and go up in flames while the North County Fire would utilize all its corporate provided training to watch it burn. A January 17, 2021, Pajaronian article would also quote Chief Mendoza as stating that there “is a lot of guessing used” regarding determining the size of the fire and that several cameras related to the safety system had failed. Monterey County spokeswoman Maia Carroll was also quoted as saying, “No active fire suppression is taking place, the batteries must burn themselves out. No water can be used. This is standard action for battery fires.”



When the standard action for battery fires is to let them burn out then what training did North County Fire receive? If health and environmental concerns were raised and known well before the January 2025 Vistra Fire, why did North County Fire lack the appropriate equipment to detect and monitor the release of toxins, including hydrogen fluoride? North County Fire has received ample funding in recent years to afford proper training and equipment to respond to lithium-ion battery fires but has opted after multiple incidents not to do so, instead deferring to “guessing”.

A fire department dependent upon the property tax revenue of a power plant that fails to adequately train and equip itself to respond to fires at that very same power plant is not serving the public nor is it acting in the interest of public safety. North County Fire had the revenue to “do better” in 2022, 2023, and 2024, yet relied on for-profit corporations to provide training on how to respond. Vistra, PG&E, the fire department and public officials knew hydrogen fluoride is released during a lithium-ion battery fire, but it took Monterey County Sheriff Tina Nieto assessing the situation and ordering the evacuation of nearby communities because she wasn't going to rely on “maybes”.

North Monterey County officials are as equally as culpable as Vistra for the fire on January 16, 2025, and the emergency response, or rather lack of. The voters passed Prop 218 with the expectation that our fire department would serve public not corporate interests. The same can be said for our many elected leaders who accepted campaign contributions from Vistra's PAC.

Four weeks since the Vistra BESS Fire and still no accountability or transparency, only defection, excuses and disinformation from Vistra and local government. This conduct by officials only further erodes public trust and jeopardizes public health and safety.

Pajaronian articles:

<https://pajaronian.com/additional-funding-new-chief-mark-new-era-at-north-county-fire/>

<https://pajaronian.com/north-county-fire-welcomes-7-new-firefighters/>

<https://pajaronian.com/north-county-fire-district-welcomes-new-firefighters/>

<https://pajaronian.com/power-plant-fires-explored-at-town-hall-meeting/>

<https://pajaronian.com/moss-landing-fire-update-battling-battery-fires-difficult/>

<https://pajaronian.com/fire-re-ignites-at-moss-landing-power-plant/>

Prop 218:

<https://www.ncfpd.org/prop-218>

[https://www.montereycountynow.com/opinion/mcnow\\_intro/given-the-ongoing-severe-drought-in-california-having-a-well-staffed-fire-department-adds-a/article\\_f80ab7d6-cfca-11eb-9a2b-23e8de2033d1.html](https://www.montereycountynow.com/opinion/mcnow_intro/given-the-ongoing-severe-drought-in-california-having-a-well-staffed-fire-department-adds-a/article_f80ab7d6-cfca-11eb-9a2b-23e8de2033d1.html)