

A Conversation With Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Pete Nowicki

By Jonathan Goodwin, Guest Writer

Chief Nowicki, tell us something about how things were 25 years ago when you started out with the Moraga Fire District.

It was a very interesting time to come into the fire service because firefighting as a professional discipline was just beginning to take form. Up until that time, for instance, the tests for fire fighters were things like you'd see in the penny arcade. They tested grip strength, the force of your hammer swing and things like that. But then there came all sorts of regulations, qualifications, certifications and standards which you had to be accountable for. As an example, safety standards for protective gear were just becoming adopted. So, the wooly pants were no longer acceptable gear in a fire and oxygen breathing apparatus was becoming required in smoky environments. In those days you'd see all these guys retiring with cancer and heart problems; I don't think we're going to see that so much any more...and that's a good thing.

In those days we didn't have anything like the technology we have today. Back then everything was manually driven, today almost everything is computerized: patient reports, EKGs, defibrillators, the pumping systems, the vehicle tracking systems and so on.

Since the job has shifted from blue collar to something closer to white, you must now be looking for different qualities in your new applicants. Absolutely. We looking for intelligent, articulate people who can pass the nation-wide test requirements, but who are also street smart, have life experiences and other outside skills like, say, welding or changing their own motor oil.

How has the relationship between the District and the community changed since you started?

I'd say that it's become more professional and less like an extended family. Back then many of the fire fighters lived in Moraga and had grown up there. So, if you went out on a medical call and didn't know the patient, another person on your crew might. That kind of familiarity has disappeared because the populations of Moraga and Orinda have grown and become much more transient.

What do you see as the challenges the District now is facing and how are you planning to address them?

First, we are in the process of getting our retirement funds out of the County system, which is bleeding us dry, and putting them into the State system. Every month our share of the County's unfunded liability increases by \$50,000-\$70,000. Second, we have to provide full time staffing for the ambulance at Station 45 in Orinda. In the budget I have

presented to the Board, I propose phasing this in over three years. The first year we would increase our staffing by calling in paramedics to work overtime. The second year we would hire three more personnel, and the third year we would hire another three more. In the longer term, however, our biggest challenge, like for all public service agencies, is that of general funding. That is, the District is funded primarily by residential property taxes, and while this revenue source will remain fairly constant, our costs for apparatus, competitive wages, utilities, workers' compensation, medical coverage, retirement, etc. will only increase over the years.

Nowadays, how is the public involved with the District, and how would you like to see this increase?

We have a much closer relationship with our residents than most fire districts in terms of people dropping in to talk with us or attending our open houses and pancake breakfasts. And there's the Rescue One Foundation. I cannot believe how generous our residents have been through this program.

As for greater involvement, when voting for their Fire District Director, people should take some time to look into the platform that person is running on, rather than just voting carelessly.

Another way is to get involved with the fire safety principles we espouse such as having safe vegetation clearance around your home and having a non-combustible roof and non-combustible siding. They can also enhance community safety by learning CPR or getting CERT (Citizen Emergency Response Team) training.

Also, our Board of Directors meetings are open to the public and, especially now during budget time, people are welcome to come to these meetings to make sure that we're spending their money wisely. Anyone can find out about these things on our website, MOFD.org.

Jonathan Goodwin is a catastrophic fire prevention activist who serves as Central Coordinator for the Canyon Fire Council, as Board Secretary for the Diablo Fire Safe Council and will soon become an instructor for Lamorinda CERT.



Pete Nowicki



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