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MOFD Rejects LAFCO Report Findings

By Andrea A. Firth

"I am very proud of our accomplishments with our revenue stream," stated Fire Chief Pete Nowicki when addressing the Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Board at their meeting on March 4th. "We have pre-eminent service abilities and capabilities as compared to other Districts in the area." While Nowicki was very pleased with the MOFD's level of fire service, he was less than pleased with the characterizations of the District and the recommendations outlined in the Municipal Service Review (MSR) recently issued by Contra Costa County's Local Agency Formation Commission, known as LAFCO.

What are LAFCO, MSR, and SOI?

LAFCO is a regulatory agency charged with discouraging urban sprawl and encouraging the orderly formation and development of local agencies, such as fire districts. About every five years, LAFCO compiles a Municipal Service Review (MSR)-a comprehensive study designed to better inform LAFCO, local agencies, and the community about their municipal services and how effectively they are being delivered. The MSR provides a detailed overview and history of the agency and evaluates a number of aspects of service delivery including growth and population projections for the area, facility capacity, and the financial stability of the agency. LAFCO is also responsible to determine and update the agency's Sphere of Influence (SOI)-the physical boundaries and service area of a local agency.

Nowicki's Problems with the MSR.

Nowicki found the report to be riddled with inaccuracies, discrepancies and unfair representations. As an example, he explained that the MSR, which was prepared by the Los Angeles-based Burr Consulting firm, referred to the MOFD as an urban area (the categorization is based on population density).

He would challenge that much of the MOFD coverage area is suburban or even rural, as in the case with Canyon, a significant factor when evaluating fire service delivery.

Nowicki strongly objected to the report's statement "the District did not identify cost-savings measures to economize on expenses." He pointed out that the MOFD regularly reviews their financial position, conducts audits, and generates an annual report. He indicated that he planned to ask LAFCO remove this statement.

What the Others Had to Say.

Gordon Nathan, a former Moraga Fire Commissioner and a member of the MOFD Board from 1997-2006, was troubled by the presentation of the report. "The whole thing kind of bothers me. It sounds like somebody got to [the consultant] and outlined what was important to them." He questioned how the consultant came to the conclusions and recommendations outlined, and encouraged the Fire Chief to point to the District's strategic plan in his response to LAFCO. Specifically, Gordon challenged the report's SOI options that suggested the possible detachment of the City of Orinda from the District or annexation of the MOFD to ConFire. "This is diametrically opposed to what the voters in Orinda and Moraga chose in 1997," stated Gordon.

Richard Olsen, a former Moraga Fire Commissioner for 12 years who was a strong advocate for the creation of the MOFD, outlined his problems with the MSR to the Board. Olsen had attended the LAFCO meeting when the consulting firm presented the MSR. He was not impressed with the consultant's report or

presentation and felt that fire service was not her area of expertise. Olsen particularly found fault with the use of cost per capita when evaluating and comparing fire service finances and believes there were many flaws to the methodology utilized in the MSR. "When people try to use that metric [cost per capita] they do not understand fire service," stated Olsen.

Art Haigh, an Orinda resident and a former member of Orinda's Revenue Enhancement Task Force (the Task Force submitted its final report to the Orinda City Council in December) also addressed the Board. He acknowledged that the per capita comparison had been disputed in the Task Force's report as well, but he challenged the Board to investigate whether the District can do its work more efficiently and get the costs down. "The question is are we getting our money's worth for the services given," stated Haigh.

What Next? The MOFD Board members unanimously agreed that the MSR did not accurately characterize the District and that the recommendations were problematic. Nowicki and the Board plan to file a written response to LAFCO specifically outlining the areas of the MSR that they feel require revision. Director John Wyro will present an ad hoc committee report regarding LAFCO at the March 18th Board meeting.

Reach the reporter at: andrea@lamorindaweekly.com

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