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Moraga and Orinda Oppose MOFD Annexation to ConFire

By Andrea A. Firth

The Councils from the Town of Moraga and the City of Orinda have both unanimously voted to reject the transfer of their fire and paramedic services from the Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) to ConFire-the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District-a large metropolitan fire agency which serves nine cities and several unincorporated areas stretching from Lafayette to Martinez and San Pablo to Antioch.

The potential dismantling of the MOFD and integration with ConFire has been proposed as an option in a state-required review of fire protection and emergency medical services throughout the County-the Municipal Service Review (MSR). The Contra Costa County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), a state regulatory body charged with the oversight of local agency boundaries, is currently evaluating the recommendations outlined in the MSR. The MOFD found the MSR, which was developed by Burr Consulting of Los Angeles, contained factual inaccuracies and inappropriate comparisons and criticized the report's use of cost-per-capita to evaluate fire service efficiency and economy.

A little background. The Moraga-Orinda Fire District was formed in July of 1997 as an independent special district to provide more efficient fire protection and paramedic services to the two communities. At that time, Orinda's residents were dissatisfied with the service they received from ConFire, specifically the lengthy response times for paramedic service and the use of Orinda tax dollars to subsidize service in other parts of the County. Subsequently, Moraga and Orinda consolidated their two fire districts transferring their tax contributions to the MOFD to provide local control and improved infrastructure and service.

Why is the MSR significant to Moraga and Orinda? In addition to providing an overview and analysis of the MOFD's operations, the MSR identified three options for potentially changing the MOFD boundaries. Option 1 leaves the MOFD's service area essentially status quo with the addition of a 101-acre territory on the eastern border of Orinda and Lafayette. This area is currently serviced by the MOFD and has been for several years. Option 2 detaches the City of Orinda from the MOFD, and Option 3 annexes the MOFD to ConFire and subsequently dissolves the fire district.

Moraga responds. At LAFCO's meeting on Aril 22nd, Moraga Town Council Member Mike Metcalf told the Commission that Moraga supported keeping the MOFD service area as currently designated with an update to include the 101-acre territory adjacent to Lafayette. Metcalf went on to state that de-annexation was not in the interest of the combined constituents of Moraga and Orinda. "The MOFD was formed to provide local control of fire service. It's working. Don't tread on that principle," said Metcalf. "Moraga citizens prefer to pay more to get more," he added. He also presented LAFCO with a letter from Moraga Mayor Dave Trotter that requested that any reference to continuing to study the de-annexation [of Orinda] or merger with another district be removed from the MSR.

Dick Olsen, a longtime Moraga resident who was integral to the formation of the MOFD and served on the MOFD Board of Directors testified at the April 15th Moraga Town Council meeting when the MSR was discussed. "This is the fourth time that LAFCO has tried to do this merger," Olsen recalled. "Every time they've been stopped or overwhelmingly voted down." According to Olsen, the motivation for a merger is financial. "The County has long wanted to add Moraga and Orinda

to ConFire's list of positive financial contributors," said Olsen. "The inevitable result of any such merger would be a degradation of services in both Moraga and Orinda, including the likely closure of at least one fire station (Station 43 on Honey Hill Road in Northeast Orinda), in order to skim money from Moraga and Orinda and reallocate those funds to other parts of the County."

Orinda responds. Also in attendance at the LAFCO meeting was Orinda City Manager Janet Keeter who reported the Orinda City Council's position regarding the MSR options, which had been discussed at length and voted upon at the City Council meeting the previous evening. Orinda's Council also supported leaving the MOFD boundaries intact with a slight modification (Option 1) and opposed the annexation of the MOFD to ConFire (Option 3) and further requested that LAFCO remove this option from the MSR.

Orinda's Council chose not to respond to Option 2-the detachment of Orinda from the MOFD. During the Council's discussion of the MSR and response to LAFCO, Council Member Steve Glazer noted that Orinda's detachment was very unlikely, and the City's legal counsel explained that this option would require many factors to align including the agreement of several affected parties, a series of studies that supported the arrangement, and possibly a special election.

LAFCO's next step. LAFCO chose to keep the MSR as a working document and to form a subcommittee to meet individually with each of the fire agencies in the County, including the MOFD, before finalizing the MSR. LAFCO Commissioner David Piepho, who is a firefighter with the Alameda County Fire District, proposed the need for further fact finding and understanding of the individual fire districts' issues. "LAFCO's greater goal is to provide for all the communities, not individual towns," stated Piepho. "Whether consolidation is right for Contra Costa County, we don't know until we sit down and talk to the individual communities."

MOFD Strategic Planning Process Underway

By Andrea A. Firth

On Saturday, April 25th, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board held a public meeting to review the District's Strategic Plan and obtain community input. Although the meeting was sparsely attended, the Board actively engaged the residents on hand for feedback on the goals that the MOFD has identified to chart their course over the next few years. The MOFD has been working with management consultant Larry Bienati to gather insight from MOFD staff, management, and community members to guide the process for strategic planning through 2012.

Among the five core areas that the MOFD identified as a focus for their strategic planning efforts, fiscal responsibility generated the most debate at the meeting. Orinda resident Martin Resch, who was a member of Orinda's Revenue Enhancement Task Force, acknowledged the community's desire to continue to receive the existing high level of fire and emergency services but questioned the District's ability to achieve that objective in a fiscally responsible manner with the MOFD's current financial structure. Resch estimated that it may require 15 to 20 years for the MOFD's portfolio to get back on target due to the market downturn and with the current pension program obligations. MOFD Director Fred Weil acknowledged the fiscal challenges facing the District and emphasized the high priority that the Board places on addressing the problem. Weil also acknowledged the special circumstances and unknowns associated with negotiated contracts which is an element of the MOFD's financial situation. John Banuelos, who serves with Resch on Orinda's Financial Advisory Committee, suggested that the MOFD form a citizens' advisory committee to tap the expertise of community members and to help promote awareness and acceptance within the community for the MOFD's future plans.

The next step in the MOFD's strategic planning process will be to present a finalized plan with specific strategies and measurable objectives-or as MOFD President Pete Wilson described as "the meat on the bones"-at an upcoming May Board meeting.

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