



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published May 27th, 2009

LAFCO to MOFD, Moraga, and Orinda-Keep Talking

By Andrea A. Firth

Representatives from the town of Moraga, the city of Orinda, and the Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) drew a collective sigh of relief as a subcommittee for the Local Agency Formation Commission of Contra Costa County (LAFCO) decided to defer recommendations to annex the MOFD or the city of Orinda to ConFire, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. Although the three agencies (MOFD, Moraga, and Orinda) have not been in complete agreement about all things related to fire service delivery financing over the past year, the triumvirate had collectively rejected any attachment to ConFire—a large metropolitan fire agency which serves nine cities and several unincorporated areas stretching from Lafayette to Martinez and San Pablo to Antioch.

While the LAFCO subcommittee must take their recommendations to the full Commission for adoption, any annexation to ConFire in the near future seems unlikely. The LAFCO subcommittee did, however, strongly encourage the MOFD, Moraga, and Orinda to actively explore ways to address the infrastructure challenges (from both water supply and road access) that may impede effective fire service delivery across the fire district and particularly in Orinda.

The LAFCO subcommittee members discussed the recommendations proposed in the Municipal Service Review (MSR) with representatives from the MOFD, Moraga, and Orinda to gain local insight on the impact of the proposed recommendations. [The MSR is a state-required, comprehensive review of the fire and emergency medical service providers for a given area.] Gayle Uilkema, who is the LAFCO Vice Chair and the County Board Supervisor for District 2, which includes both Moraga and Orinda, was alarmed by the MSR's reference to a proposal from Orinda's Revenue Enhancement Task Force (RETF) to reallocate fire district funds to address Orinda's infrastructure needs. "When people vote to support fire taxes, they expect the money to be spent on fire and medical services," stated Uilkema. The other members of the subcommittee concurred that LAFCO did not want to encourage the transfer of funds from fire districts to other agencies.

"Essentially they want to pick the Fire District's pocket to fix Orinda's roads," stated Dick Olsen, a longtime Moraga resident and a former Moraga Fire District Commissioner. Art Haigh, an Orinda resident and a member of Orinda's RETF, countered that delivery of adequate fire service in Orinda is heavily impacted by the sufficiency of the water flow and the condition of the roads, and Orinda's Mayor Sue Severson added that Orinda's situation was unique due to the extremely poor road conditions throughout the city. In response, the LAFCO subcommittee members acknowledged that the availability of adequate water supply and road

access, while not specifically within the fire district's responsibilities, are inextricably linked to fire service delivery. The subcommittee recognized the communities' desire for local control and planned to recommend that the agencies work together. "We encourage the fire district to work with the other agencies, because the roads, water, and electricity are all essential to fire service delivery," stated LAFCO member Dave Piepho. "We've got to work together. The State and the County are not going to fix our problems," he added.

While the options of the MOFD or Orinda being annexed to ConFire were moved off the table, the subcommittee did discuss, in general terms, the concept of consolidating fire districts across the County. LAFCO Executive Director Lou Ann Texilra explained that LAFCO is not empowered to initiate annexation, but the Commission can initiate mergers, consolidations, and the formation of new fire districts. "LAFCO receives their directive from the State, and it is a very powerful Commission," stated LAFCO member Helen Allen. "But our decisions can only enhance fire service," added Peipho, who in addition to serving on LAFCO works as a firefighter in a consolidated district in Alameda. Piepho noted that cities and towns can be part of a consolidated district and still maintain high levels of service. "We [LAFCO] are venturing into uncharted territory which is very uncomfortable for a lot people" he stated. Piepho added that members of LAFCO would be attending a conference focused on fire district consolidation during the first week in June.

Reach the reporter at: andrea@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA