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Vehicle Sets Itself on Fire in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini and Lee Borrowman



MOFD fire crew at the scene

A Moraga resident awoke to the light of flames coming from his Volvo that was parked in his driveway on Sandringham Drive South at about 2:00 a.m. on Friday, August 7. The fire quickly spread to nearby vegetation. According to Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Battalion Chief Stephen Healy, the homeowner acted quickly to evacuate his family from the home after realizing that the fire

could spread to the house.

Five crews from MOFD and two from Contra Costa County Fire responded to the vehicle, which was totally destroyed by the fire. No injuries were reported.

The next day traces of the fire were visible on the garage door of the property. A pine tree in front showed burned branches on one side. The owner of the used Volvo explained that the car caught fire

spontaneously during the night.

Battalion Chief Healy concurred. "Modern vehicles are outfitted with a complex array of electronic systems and it is possible for them to catch fire even when the vehicle is at rest," said Healy, "it is a rare occurrence, but we had another fire that occurred in a garage in Moraga in the past year."

Five apparatus were dispatched to the scene, as is normal

procedure, and the fire was put out in less than an hour.

"Junipers grew on that property," said Healy, "those are extremely flammable bushes, containing oils like eucalyptuses trees, and they burn vigorously once ignited."

Healy recommends that residents check fire-safe landscaping guidelines and seriously consider replacing juniper with other types of fire resistant vegetation. Healy recommends the U.S. Fire Administration's website for information: <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/downloads/pdf/fswy12.pdf>

Moraga Orinda Fire District Fire Marshall Mike Mentink urges residents to use caution when working with power tools which may produce sparks during periods of high fire danger. Sparks from a grinding tool ignited dry vegetation behind Grizzly Peak Stables on Lomas Contadas in Orinda on August 10. The fire burned 1.5 acres before being extinguished.

Suspension of Prop 1A Focus of MOFD Finance Committee Meeting

By Lucy Amaral

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Finance Committee met August 6 to discuss the effects of the suspension of Prop 1A, an action which allows the State of California to borrow up to eight percent of property tax revenue from local governments and special districts (like MOFD), to

offset the State's deficit.

If the full amount is borrowed by the State of California, MOFD can expect to be shorted over \$1.3 million in tax revenue for the 2009/10 budget year. As this money is considered a loan, the State is technically required to repay the borrowed funds within three years, with interest. In the meantime, the first 'shorted' funding payment will be December of this year, when property tax revenue is distributed.

Finance committee members John Wyro and Frank Sperling were also briefed by staff on the options by which MOFD could offset their reduction. Within the California State Assembly Bill ABx4 15, which

suspended Prop 1A, there was also language that set up the opportunity for local agencies to form a joint powers authority (JPA) to issue notes backed by the state's repayment obligation. MOFD Fire Chief Pete Nowicki said that the Board has not made any decisions whether or not to participate in the JPA issued notes, and that for this year, the borrowed funds can be absorbed through MOFD's reserve fund.

During the discussion, the committee made it clear that borrowing from reserves is not a long term fix and repayment by the State is critical. "(For this year) we are able to (continue to) provide a high level of service with the budget we have to work with," Wyro said.

"However, we will feel this cut deeply if the money cannot be recovered from the State."

Even without the State's take, stagnant tax revenue and higher fixed costs has MOFD already running an almost \$900,000 deficit for the 2009/2010 budget year. This shortfall will also be filled with reserve funds, however, Nowicki said that they are actively addressing the issue. Immediate modifications include not 'up-staffing' on red flag days, he added, and other changes will come in the winter months, when the fire danger is not as high.

The committee said they will present this information at the next MOFD Board meeting scheduled for August 19.

MOFD Moves Closer to New Fire Chief

By Lucy Amaral

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) moved one step closer to choosing a new Fire Chief. At a MOFD work session Board meeting held August 5, executive recruiter Bill Avery advised the Board that 56 applications have been received, many, he said, "at senior command staff levels within their current agencies." The individual hired for this position will replace interim Fire Chief Pete Nowicki, who officially retired in December of 2008 but has been retained on a contract-basis until a replacement can be found.

Avery told the Board that the next step would be to conduct formal interviews and, with the help of "Stakeholder" groups including a community panel, an internal team and a Chief's team, will whittle down the applicants to a "short list" that would then be presented to the Board for their review. No

specific date was given for the final presentation. Board members Frank Sperling and Fred Weil strongly recommended a very expedite the process and requested a timeline going forward. Weil said he hoped a new Fire Chief would be signed no later than September 30.

During the meeting, the Board also responded to the recent press coverage regarding Chief Nowicki's retirement package. Through an ad hoc committee the Board issued letters to the editor to various publications (including Lamorinda Weekly) and responded to press and community inquiries. Board President Pete Wilson said he hopes these efforts will suffice and that the Board can get back to "working for the good of the district." (The Board has posted its response on the MOFD website: <http://www.mofd.org>.)

With regard to the Board's request to learn more about how the retirement components work (this time specifically the "3% at 50" rule), and what changes the Board might be able to enact, Chief Nowicki advised the board that the San Ramon Fire District (SRFD) recently retained an attorney to report on the Ventura Decision (vacation buy-back), where the Board's responsibilities end and legislative responsibilities begin. Nowicki also said that SRFD has hired an independent retirement consulting company to compare SRFD's retirement system to other fire departments in the area. These reports will be presented to the SRFD at their board meeting on August 27 which will then become available to the public. Nowicki said he will acquire these reports and present them to the MOFD Board in September.

New Art in Orinda's Public Spaces ... continued from page 4



Photo Ohlen Alexander

The new sculptures include a gateway piece that one walks through by artist Joyce Clemens and a kinetic peacock by Martinez-based Patricia Vader. "We deliberately try to identify a wide variety of styles and media that will appeal to a broad spectrum of individuals, both adults and children," notes Almaguer.

City Hall will be the recip-

ient of two table-top sculptures from the estate of James Presntini, a well-known artist who taught at the University of California at Berkeley. One of this installation's most unique works is a piece entitled Surveillance by artist Kent Roberts that will be suspended in the atrium of the Library by the end of the month.

All of the sculptures are

currently "on loan" to the city, and the APPC is currently soliciting the input of residents regarding the potential acquisition of public artwork. A brief survey is posted at the city website for residents to weigh in (<http://www.cityoforinda.org>). "The ultimate goal is to purchase one or more works as permanent acquisitions, states Almaguer.

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