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F.A.I.R. Proposes to Dissolve MOFD and Contract with ConFire

By Andrea A. Firth



Art Haigh of F.A.I.R. Photo by A. Firth

Almost 150 people packed the Orinda Library Auditorium at the January 5th Orinda City Council meeting to hear a presentation by the citizen group Fire and Infrastructure Renewal (FAIR) that proposes to dissolve the Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) and contract with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District (ConFire) and American Medical Response (AMR) for the City's fire and emergency medical services. The contractual arrangement would save \$65 million over the next 12 years that could be reallocated to fund Orinda's infrastructure needs, according to FAIR.

Representatives from all three agencies in the fire/emergency service triangle [Orinda-Moraga-MOFD] were on hand to hear the hour-long presentation by FAIR leaders Al Resnick and Art Haigh. These attendees included the five Board of Directors of the MOFD, Fire Chief Randy Bradley along with several uniformed firefighters; and Moraga's Mayor Ken Chew, Councilmember Mike Metcalf, and Town Manager Mike Segrest.

"We are here to propose a better model for the delivery of fire and EMS. It's better because it costs less, leaving funds to address other infrastructure needs," stated Resnick, a 33-year resident of Orinda. "We also need to address the cost inequity between Orinda and Moraga. The money saved will be used to improve the safety of the city," he stated, adding that FAIR members want the MOFD tax reallocation investigated before the City proposes any new taxes.

Who is FAIR? "FAIR cares deeply about this community and the safety of all our residents," stated Resnick of the group comprised of 80-plus residents from Orinda and Moraga. "We are not a group of disgruntled malcontents...We are active community volunteers," he added. The organizers of FAIR are not new to the infrastructure challenge facing Orinda—a decaying road and water pipe system that will require \$120 million to bring up to optimal condition. Several FAIR members worked on the

infrastructure bond Measures Q and E that narrowly failed passing in 2006 and 2007. Subsequently, FAIR leaders Resnick, Haigh, and the team's number-crunching analyst Steve Cohn were all part of Orinda's Revenue Enhancement Task Force which first raised the idea of tapping the MOFD tax revenues for Orinda's roads.

What's the Issue? FAIR questioned the appropriateness of the MOFD's \$19 million budget, which they pointed out totals more than the budgets for the City of Orinda and Town of Moraga combined. "We do need to pay an appropriate amount for good [fire] service," noted Haigh, "but do we need to pay that much? Lafayette pays half of what we pay," he added.

How will it Work? The new arrangement will provide the same fire protection, staffing levels, and engine and ambulance response times, stated Haigh. Contracting for these services will yield lower overhead costs through the economies of scale associated with a larger regional fire district like ConFire, he explained. One key difference in FAIR's proposal is that the district's two full-time ambulances will be staffed with AMR paramedics, not firefighters. The MOFD currently has firefighters who are dual-certified as paramedics covering the ambulances, a practice which FAIR contends is expensive and unnecessary. [See sidebar for FAIR proposal specifics.]

FAIR projects \$2.5 million in cost savings during the first year and this includes covering the existing MOFD pension bond obligation. FAIR says it based the fire service cost on conversations with ConFire staff who estimated the contract costs at \$2.5 million per station per year plus the cost of a fire chief. FAIR believes the savings will increase over time to generate an overall cost savings of \$77 million by 2022, of which \$65 million would be reallocated to Orinda and \$12 million to Moraga.

The Inequity Issue. Orinda receives the lion's share of the projected savings because Orinda pays more, according to the FAIR proposal. "Times and facts have changed," stated Haigh. While he acknowledged that property tax revenues have greatly outpaced inflation over the past several years due to the rapid rise in assessed values in both Orinda and Moraga, he stated, "There is an unfair balance between what Orinda and Moraga contribute, because Orinda's taxes have grown at a faster rate.

" Later in the meeting, Orinda Council Member Steve Glazer countered the inequity argument citing the conclusion of a Tri-Agency Committee which found the cost-share of the MOFD, which is currently about a 65% to 35% split between Orinda and Moraga, is fair based on the scope of service and area of coverage each municipality receives.

ConFire Annexation Fear. FAIR reported that they had numerous conversations with commissioners from LAFCO (Local Agency Formation Commission) who refuted the idea that ConFire would like to annex the MOFD to take the property tax revenue for the County. However, Council Member Victoria Smith suggested caution with respect to LAFCO noting the serious financial deficits faced by ConFire and the deeper fire tax revenue pockets of Orinda and Moraga.

Next Steps. At the conclusion of the FAIR presentation, Resnick strongly encouraged the City Council to create a subcommittee to confirm that fire service tax revenue can be transferred to the cities; to validate the accuracy of the FAIR presentation; and to work quickly to complete the review within sixty days. Staff was directed to coordinate a Tri-agency meeting with Moraga and the MOFD, and Mayor McCormick and Council Member Amy Worth were appointed to this subcommittee.

The MOFD has planned a question-and-answer session with FAIR representatives at its February 3rd meeting to be held at 1280 Moraga Way starting at 7:00 p.m.

MOFD Chief Bradley's Rebuttal

"I never thought I would be standing before the Orinda City Council regarding a proposal to dissolve the MOFD. I'm shocked," said MOFD Chief Randy Bradley when he stepped up to the podium to respond to the FAIR presentation. He then moved point by point through his rationale of why he does not believe that the dissolution of the MOFD and contracting with ConFire and AMR is the appropriate course of action.

"I have been through this before," said Bradley, explaining that he had been part of similar size fire department in the past; one in which he had recommended consolidating with a larger fire district as the best option. However, Bradley was emphatic that this was not the best option for MOFD.

"I believe that we have a very viable fire district. There are unique challenges, but I don't believe in anyway that you should risk the quality of your fire service to fix your roads," said Bradley.

"This District was created for a reason. You expect a high level of service, and that is what you are getting."

During his preliminary analysis of the FAIR proposal, Bradley found some flaws and reasons for concern. According to Bradley:

- The costs of contracting for fire service with ConFire are understated. FAIR's assumption that the cost of the ConFire contract would be \$2.5 mil per station annually should be closer to \$3.3 million per station annually. He noted that the MOFD operates at a lower per-engine-company cost than ConFire.
- ConFire is a quality department, but ConFire is a special district and does not have experience contracting services.
- ConFire faces difficult financial times ahead and may need to close the least busy stations (brown outs) and reduce companies from three to two persons which could negatively impact coverage in small communities like Orinda and Moraga.
- FAIR's assumption that contract rates with ConFire and AMR will rise by only 3.5% per year is highly questionable.
- Replacing MOFD's firefighter-paramedics with AMR paramedic-only staff on ambulances would reduce the number of firefighters initially arriving at the scene of a fire.
- Bradley indicated that he had spoken with AMR management last week, and that he did not think the AMR contract was feasible as outlined. "There is no money in a [geographically] peripheral district like ours. We don't run enough EMS calls to support two ambulances [from a private agency]."
- Regarding LAFCO, Bradley noted that the agency has the authority to dissolve districts and to assign fire tax dollars. Petitioning for dissolution runs the risk that LAFCO might alternatively elect to merge the MOFD into ConFire.
- "I believe that this [the MOFD] is the best model for these communities," Bradley concluded.

FAIR Proposal

- Orinda and Moraga dissolve the MOFD, or Orinda detaches
- Contract with ConFire for fire service, keeping the same configuration: 5 fire stations, 3 firefighters and 1 paramedic per truck
- All employees absorbed by ConFire; one dedicated Assistant Fire Chief
- Contract with AMR for emergency service: staff the 2 existing ambulances with AMR paramedics
- Not in favor of annexation to ConFire or of forming own department

Average Property Tax for Fire/Emergency Service per Household *		
City/Town	% of total tax	\$ per household (average)
Orinda	22.6	1,650
Moraga	18.9	1,000
Lafayette	14.1	830

*As presented by FAIR. % of total tax as established by Proposition 13.

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