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Q&A With MOFD Fire Chief Randy Bradley

By Lucy Amaral



MOFD Fire Chief Randy Bradley

Nearly two years ago, Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) hired Randy Bradley as its new Fire Chief. He faced pension issues, an economic downturn and a community concerned about the management of the District. Today, some of those challenges remain, some have improved and some new issues have surfaced. In this first of two parts, we recently posed questions regarding these and other topics to the Chief.

Q. How has the economy affected the District?

A. Unfortunately the District has experienced about a \$1.5 million decrease in spending power over the past two years. This is primarily due to a significant increase in retirement costs and a reduction in assessed property values, which reduces our property tax revenues. We have been able to maintain our primary service levels through renegotiating service contracts, leaving a Battalion Chief's position vacant, eliminating several staff positions, and, firefighters not receiving raises for the past three years. A small increase in ambulance revenues, cost recovery for vehicle accidents and the use of some of our reserves has allowed the District to maintain service levels.

Q. You came into the job knowing there were several hot-button issues. What have you found yourself dealing with that wasn't expected?

A. After about a month in my new position, the Orinda City Council was presented with a proposal to detach from the Fire District and contract with Contra Costa County Consolidated Fire District and American Medical Response for fire and emergency medical services. The group predicted that revenues would increase during the next ten years and the excess would be available to address road and water issues in Orinda. I spent a lot of time evaluating their proposal, the District's fire protection/EMS Model, meeting with the public, LAFCO, City and Town Councils, Fire Districts and County Supervisors explaining the value of our model and their proposal's negative impact on service levels.

My conclusion was that while we live in a rural-like community we expect and even demand urban and suburban service levels. Having well trained, well-equipped, experienced firefighter paramedics arrive within five minutes of a 911 call is a high priority for a vast majority of the citizens within the District. Meeting the five-minute response goal requires five fire stations. Similar-sized communities with higher housing densities and less open space may only require two or three fire stations to meet response times.

The road and water pipe problems in Orinda exist for similar reasons and some in the community would argue that urban roads and water pipes are now a larger priority than suburban fire protection. We believe that the vast majority continue to place a higher priority on fire and medical response capabilities. However, the District has a vested interest in improving the roads and water systems in both communities and we will work with both communities to identify funding mechanisms without decreasing fire protection and EMS services.

With that said, the group that was proposing an alternative model no longer supports dissolving the District. I have met several times with the group's members and the meetings have been very respectful. They believe that their ideas are in the best interest of the community and we respectfully agree to disagree.

Q. How is the District addressing its unfunded pension liability?

A. We are currently evaluating several options. One being considered is to encumber future revenues realized from new development. While this has merit, we need to be careful due to our continued decrease in property values. We may need new development revenues to maintain service levels in the future. We are also negotiating with our labor union to potentially change the retiree health benefit, which would drastically reduce that retiree medical (GASB 45) unfunded liability. The union is evaluating and proposing other options to address unfunded liabilities, which will be considered through the collective bargaining process. They understand the importance of addressing our unfunded liabilities and they have worked collaboratively to identify options.

Q. The long-term forecast from the 9/1 MOFD finance committee meeting shows a sharp decrease in available funds as early as 2013/14, with a negative total balance showing for the first time. How will MOFD address this

issue, considering the increase in pension contributions and a still unfunded GASB 45?

A. In the next year, the District will be working on a new Strategic Business plan with a strong finance component. That process will help identify future finance options to ensure we maintain our service levels and begin to address our unfunded liabilities. We will continue to evaluate operations to improve efficiencies and keep an eye on assessed property values. We will also continue to meet and confer with our union to ensure we have a stable workforce with sustainable service levels. The unfunded liabilities will take some time to completely address. The District inherited the drivers of many of the unfunded liabilities prior to the requirement to evaluate retiree medical as an unfunded liability. We currently pay over \$3 million annually towards unfunded liabilities (pensions) and that is not enough.

Next: The Chief answers questions regarding perceived funding inequities, MOFD accomplishments and future goals.

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