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MOFD Revives Building Purchase Concept

By Lucy Amaral

At its December 8 meeting, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Board of Directors revived the concept of purchasing the empty building located at 1150 Moraga Way as the new home for the District's Administrative offices. For months, the Board has been searching for an adequate site to house the combined administrative staff of MOFD. Currently, the staff is split, with half located at Orinda's Station 45 and half at Moraga's Station 41. A facilities committee report stated that Station 41 was in need of seismic, gender and space upgrades, and by combining the administrative offices offsite, this would allow MOFD to repurpose the existing space for use by firefighters. In order to repurpose the building, the current administrative offices must first be moved out. Options the Board considered included renting space from the City of Orinda or in an office building in Moraga, building a modular office space behind Station 41, and purchasing the building at 1150 Moraga Way, which is located next to Station 41.

At the September 27 Board meeting the proposed purchase of the 1150 building was defeated on a 3-2 vote, with dissenting Board members voicing concern about cash flow issues and the current economic climate, followed by the request to research the other options. At the November 16 meeting, a lease/buy option to purchase 1150 Moraga Way was introduced by Board President John Wyro.

According to Fire Chief Randy Bradley, with a lease/buy contract, a third party (bank, finance or bond company) purchases the property and makes it available to the Local Government (such as the Fire District) in return for semi-annual or annual payments consisting of principal and interest. This public finance tool is used because state law does not permit local government to encumber funds for more than one year to purchase facilities or equipment. When the contract is completely paid, the Local Government (Fire District) owns the property free and clear of any lien or restriction.

Payment options could range from anywhere from a 5-year to a 20-year term or more, with payments adjusted accordingly. According to staff reports, a five-year term payment would be \$219,915 semi-annually, a ten-year semi-annual payment would be \$119,091, and a 20-year semi-annual payment would be \$75,373.

Board debate this time around shifted enough to pass the lease/buy option by a 3/2 vote, but concerns about the current economic climate, cash flow and public perception remained.

Board members Brook Mancinelli and Dick Olsen continued to be against the purchase option, preferring to look at leasing from the City of Orinda or the construction of a modular building. Frank Sperling, who voted against the concept last time, opted to support the idea at this meeting, citing the improved cash-flow options, the benefits of owning versus renting and the opportunity to facilitate an improved level of fire service.

Fred Weil, who voted for the purchase last time, continued his support, noting that if the bottom floor (which would be available) could be leased quickly, that, combined with the improved efficiencies of staffing, would help with cash flow, and at the end of the term, the building would be owned free and clear.

Wyro, who has been a proponent of the purchase all along, said that the lease/buy option would serve MOFD's needs the best, offering a cost-effective way to provide service to the community.

The other options on the table, leasing from the City of Orinda, building a modular office building behind Station 41, or leasing office space in Moraga was also debated again. Board members who were against these options argued that leasing only delayed the long-term administrative housing issue, and building a unit on the area currently used for MOFD firefighter training, would require more land to be purchased in the near future, adding to the overall costs.

Once voting was complete, the Board charged Bradley to return to the negotiating table to finalize details, then bring the completed proposal back for Board review and possible approval. The next board meeting will be held on December 28.

MOFD Elects 2012 Officers

At the December 8 Board of Director's meeting, Fred Weil was nominated and elected to serve as Board President for 2012. Weil served as Vice President in 2011 and his new term will begin on January 1. John Wyro, the outgoing Board President, will return to a general Board member.

Other nominated and elected Board positions include: Brook Mancinelli as Vice President, Dick Olsen as Secretary, and Frank Sperling as Treasurer. On Wyro's recommendation, all committee appointments will be done after the first of the year, when the new Board convenes.

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