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MOFD Board Reverses Course, Cancels Building Purchase Contract

By Lucy Amaral

In a surprising turn of events at its January 18 Board meeting, the Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Board of Directors cancelled the purchase of a potential administrative building, sacrificing a \$25,000 deposit, and putting the District back to square one with regards to where to house its staff. The sale of the building had been scheduled to close on January 26.

The Board approved the purchase of the building, located at 1150 Moraga Way, at its December 28, 2011 Board meeting. Relocating MOFD's administrative staff was determined to be the first step in the remodeling of Station 41 in Moraga. A facilities report had identified gender, space and ADA required upgrades were needed for that station. One option was to combine the administrative offices, currently split between Station 45 in Orinda and Station 41 in Moraga, into a single office and repurpose the space in Station 41.

In a prepared statement during the January meeting, Board President Fred Weil said that while he felt the Board had vetted the purchase decision, the negative public perception could put the future of the District in jeopardy and he therefore now opposed the purchase of the building. "The risk is not that we will not be able to continue to deliver services to the community if we buy 1150," said Weil. "But rather that the District may be irrationally torn apart and that our correct economic decision may be the trigger."

The purchase, which was approved by a three to two vote, was highly criticized by not only the dissenting board members but also many members of the community. Public comments against the purchase, both at the MOFD Board Meetings and through letters to the editor in local publications, have been overwhelmingly negative. Weil noted that he felt these negative comments came from not having the complete information. "The failure of this Board is not that we have not come up with a good economic plan, but rather that we did not do a good job of educating the community," he said.

Board Member Frank Sperling, who had previously voted for the purchase of the building, echoed Weil's concerns and changed his vote as well. Sperling said while he felt the District had fully researched this option and he fully supported the purchase of the building before, he felt individuals in the District have created a perceived reality through purposeful inaccuracies and it was too difficult to try and change that reality.

Board Members Richard Olsen and Brook Mancinelli, who opposed the purchase of the building from the outset, admitted being caught off guard.

"That must not have been an easy decision for (Weil)," said Mancinelli later. "But my experiences on the Board with him have taught me that he arrived there after a considerable amount of thoughtful deliberation."

Mancinelli also said that, going forward from here, he hoped they would continue to make progress on their highest priorities: The reconstruction of station 43 in Orinda and upgrades to Station 41.

John Wyro, who attended via teleconferencing, had no comment. Weil charged MOFD Fire Chief Randy Bradley to add an item on an upcoming agenda to discuss their office space needs and options.

A special meeting was held Saturday, January 21, to formally cancel the contract.

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