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MOFD Board Not in Concert

Board president Frank Sperling censures fire station consolidation plan

By Nick Marnell

An idea that many Lamorinda residents supported as financially logical appears headed to the recycle bin. At the Feb. 20 meeting of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District's board of directors, that was the tone of district residents and a divided board regarding the potential consolidation of MOFD station 43 and Contra Costa Fire Protection District station 16.

Station 43 is scheduled to be upgraded in 2013. "Two days before the bids went out," said MOFD Fire Chief Randall Bradley, "ConFire approached MOFD." Bradley said that ConFire Chief Daryl Louder requested a partnership with MOFD to build a new fire station, after his station 16 in Lafayette was closed due to the district's financial problems. Bradley again updated the board on the benefits of the proposed consolidation. He outlined how a new station built near the Orinda/Lafayette border, with its cost and operation split by both fire districts, will result in potential savings to the MOFD of nearly \$1 million annually. Division Chief Stephen Healy conducted a slide presentation on resultant response times. If the new station 46 was located at a proposed site near El Nido Ranch Road, he explained, more addresses will experience decreases, rather than increases, in travel time.

Bradley made one final appeal for acceptance of the plan. "It will save (the two districts) \$60 million over 30 years," he said. "This is something we should pursue."

The small but passionate crowd did not agree.

"Does the MOFD want to be part of ConFire's problems?" asked Gordon Nathan, former MOFD director. "This is not the thing to do. This is not the way to go."

Moraga's Dick Olsen, along with two Orinda residents, questioned the response times outlined in Healy's presentation. Others raised political issues. "The Contra Costa Board of Supervisors will not support this," said Ellen Dale of Orinda. John Robertson, president of the Canyon Ranch Homeowners' Association, did not support the consolidation either. "This is more Lafayette's problem than Orinda's," he said.

Art Haigh, a member of FAIR (Fire and Infrastructure Renewal) - an Orinda group critical of the city's financial arrangement with the MOFD - favored the pursuit of the consolidation, mainly for financial reasons. "But I'd like to see the idea explored of a Lamorinda fire district," he said later.

Nor could the directors reach unanimous agreement.

Director John Wyro said that he believes the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors will approve the consolidation, and he, too, will vote for it. Even if ConFire went bankrupt in five years, he said, MOFD would have gained a new fire station, and \$5 million. So he pushed to move forward.

The \$1 million annual savings is the main reason director Fred Weil cited for his support of the consolidation. But he insisted that the new property be owned by the MOFD, and that the new station be staffed and controlled by the MOFD. He sought assurance that the county money will not disappear in a year. "How do we secure a long-term commitment?" he asked.

Though he believes that the supervisors will not approve the idea, director Steve Anderson said he wants to pursue the consolidation because he thinks it is financially sound for MOFD.

But speaking as a private citizen the following evening at the Moraga, Orinda and Lafayette tri-city meeting, Anderson stated that the best solution, both financially and from a service standpoint, is for MOFD and Lafayette to merge into one fire district.

Frank Sperling, board president, took the most vigorous stand of the evening. "This is the same institution that we wanted to get away from in 1997," he said, referring to Contra Costa County. "I look at this as pure folly," he said, "and I don't want to spend another dime on a folly."

On a 3-1 vote the board passed a motion authorizing Bradley to begin negotiations to secure a piece of property for the proposed station, without, however, one cent to be spent on the process. Sperling voted against; director Alex Evans was absent.

With two divided boards involved - the board of supervisors voting 3-2 in favor of exploring the idea - the consolidation plan is either one keystroke away from permanent deletion or one "Undo" away from resuscitation.

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