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Supervisors Provide Lukewarm Support for ConFire/MOFD Collaboration

By David Killam

A sense of urgency permeated the Feb. 13 meeting of the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors. At issue was a request from Chief Daryl Louder of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District to "conduct formal discussions with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District to enter into a partnership to jointly build and operate a single fire station to replace fire station 16 in Lafayette and fire station 43 in east Orinda."

The urgency came from the fact that MOFD already met with contractors to bid for construction of station 43 but stopped the process when this collaboration opportunity arose. MOFD Fire Chief Randy Bradley wanted to move quickly to obtain bids because he felt that the construction industry was ramping up again. With more opportunities for the construction industry, future bids might be much more expensive. Bradley said he was willing to take that risk and put the project temporarily on hold because he felt that that the collaboration was in the best interests of both fire districts.

"The Moraga-Orinda Fire District would not build a fire station in its current location; we would move it to the border of Lafayette and Orinda," said Bradley, who favors an agreement under which Con Fire would not provide equipment or employees, but simply pay MOFD for service area coverage.

Louder estimated that each district would save about \$500,000 per year in operating costs which would recoup the \$5-6 million cost of the new station in three or four years.

Community support for collaboration between the districts was strong.

John Wyro, vice president of MOFD's board of directors, called it "an opportunity we don't want to lose."

Lafayette resident George Burt, of the Acalanes Valley Homeowners Association, asked that the board allow Louder to continue discussions with MOFD.

Reaction from the supervisors was lukewarm at best. Supervisor Karen Mitchoff felt that the proposed meetings with MOFD could provide "heightened expectations" and that she could not support the idea because the station would involve county administration without county ownership.

Supervisor John Gioia said that although he found the proposal interesting, the county needs to "have our own comprehensive discussions and meet with other districts as well for strategic discussions."

Supervisor Mary Piepho supported the collaboration stating, "We may not have an opportunity for a comprehensive study. It's a conversation we need to support," she said.

The strongest support came from Supervisor Candace Andersen, who said: "In a perfect world we would do a more comprehensive study. Long term savings for both stations can be \$1 million a year. It makes sense to move forward."

The board eventually agreed to allow Louder to explore a potential partnership. He will meet with Bradley and report back to the board by mid-March.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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