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Public Forum MOFD Needs a Better Governance Strategy

The MOFD Board of Directors is required by the California Public Resource Code to approve the District's budget and to hire and fire the Chief. Beyond these duties, its role, presumably, is to create policies which District staff would then carry out. But you don't have to look far to see that the current governance structure conduces neither to real policies nor to salubrious, well considered decisions. We the People must encourage the District to repair the system so that our long term interests can be properly considered. I have a solution to offer, but first, let's review the problem.

To begin with, our volunteer directors typically are not familiar with the ways of the Fire Service and they tend to depend upon the Fire Chief for guidance. In the recent past this brought us national disgrace when MOFD was harshly criticized (in the Wall Street Journal!) for its "policy" of so-called pension spiking.

One resonant result of this ill-fated episode is a strong and abiding public suspicion of the Board's competence as a steward of public funds. Unfortunately, Board members did not choose to use these events as an opportunity to come together with each other, staff, other local officials and the public to redefine with clarity MOFD's long term physical investment, revenue and spending policies. With that sort of collaborative planning done, they could have then returned to spending the public's money with some political confidence. However, as things now stand, whenever a major expense comes up for a vote, discussions are fractious because several directors are so intensely conscious of the political heat they must endure if they appear to be over spending. Without coherent policy guidelines, how can these men possibly provide sensible governance?

An unfortunate case in point which illustrates this is the absence of policy regarding whether or not the District should have adequate unified administrative office space. Instead of coming together with one another and the Chief to understand what sort of set up would best serve the District and its residents, the Board made de facto policy by denying funds for a new building. Because they jumped into this prior to agreeing first on the District's actual needs, the decision making process was fraught with discord and what followed was a measly accommodation to circumstances instead of thoughtful planning. Shouldn't the Board be looking at the larger picture and planning so staff can act accordingly? Wouldn't that conduce to better stewardship and governance?

All of this was again painfully evident in the Board's way of handling the possible relocation of a fire station and how this was tangled up in a possible expansion to include the City of Lafayette. In this case, again, there had been no policy discussion and no long term planning (regarding Lafayette). Instead we got the same old crisis-based, divisive 3-2 vote, shortsighted decision making all over again. Although, one director averred that a consolidated Lamorinda District would be a far more economical proposition with 7 fire stations rather than with eight (with the 7th located on the Orinda-Lafayette border), there was no discussion of this. It was too late. That discussion should have begun years ago, but, alas, the larger picture was neither properly conceived of nor planned for.

So, whom should we blame, the Fire Chief, the Board? As a recovering long time observer of the Board (six years of monthly meetings), I say that the fault lies mainly in the structure of the system and not so much with the individuals involved. Clearly, we need to modify the governance structure so that it fosters long term policy making and allows less politically motivated interference with its implementation.

Now that a majority of MOFD Board members are brand new to the position, it's more important than ever for us to wonder by what means they can be educated about the Fire Service, learn to focus on making good policy and refrain from creating thoughtless de facto policy when the political heat is turned up. In the past, the Board has attempted to remediate its internal dysfunction by engaging a short term consultant. Unfortunately, the benefits of this were likewise short term.

My suggestion is two-fold. First, the Board should hire as a consultant a retired chief level officer (part time, without benefits) for 5 years to teach them about the context of the strategies and policies they should be creating. Second, if the Board can thus-wise bring itself to agree unanimously upon the goals, strategies and policies of the District, then it can step back from micro-managing staff. That is, the Board can decide for itself if some particular initiative proposed by the Fire Chief is or is not congruent with its policies and then abstain from spending endless hours poking at the details. Board members would have their own judgment as well as the Fire Chief's to rely upon, and they would also have an independent opinion rendered by their educational consultant. If it could be made to work, this model would restore to the Board some of its faded credibility. Informational meetings would be longer, but the contentious, politically charged business meetings would be much shorter.

But the odds are slim that MOFD Board members will take steps to reform their governance structure just because they read about it in the newspaper. No, they will need you to get them motivated. Whether you live in areas served by MOFD or in Lafayette, please go to mofd.org and contact the Board members and the Chief. Please demand that they create a sensible governance structure to properly study, and then craft, the best possible fire protection and EMS arrangement for Lamorinda. We need to see thoughtful planning before they once more get lost in the weeds of their start-and-stop implementation pattern. Clearly, they need your help, they need it badly and they need it now!

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[back](#)

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