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MOFD and Lafayette Unite in Property Purchase *District controls the land; it now awaits a fire station partner*

By Nick Marnell

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the city of Lafayette entered into a joint powers agreement to purchase a parcel at 1035 Lorinda Lane in the city for use as a potential fire station 46. Escrow closed July 25.

Lafayette unanimously approved the JPA at its July 22 city council meeting. But in the fire district, opposition raged against the deal to the very end. At the July 15 district meeting, director Fred Weil and a host of agitated residents objected to the plan.

"We don't need 46 to better serve our district. And look," said Weil, as he motioned toward the two dozen audience members, most of whom spoke vehemently against the station 46 proposal, "This issue is becoming divisive in our community." He also pointed out that with the district's recent property tax assessments rising nearly 6 percent, along with the \$1.1 million federal grant awarded to MOFD, revenue will exceed the projections of the district's long-range financial plan, making the station partnership not such an urgent need. "I don't understand the rush," he said. Other district residents objected to the speculative nature of the \$1.2 million property purchase. One recommended that the district place money into a legal defense fund if it went through with the purchase.

Orinda resident Brook Mancinelli - a previous MOFD director - blasted the board. "It leaves me speechless that you think this is a good idea," he said. "If Lafayette wants to partner with us, let them buy in. Let them put their money where their mouth is."

Others not in attendance were in favor of the consolidation plan. The Fire and Infrastructure Renewal group - an Orinda-based MOFD watchdog - made it clear that it too supports the merger. "Why would everyone in Orinda be against this change, as those at the meeting claim, when the financial incentives are so significant?" F.A.I.R. expressed in an email after the meeting. The consolidation is expected to save the district nearly \$1 million per year.

Directors Steve Anderson and Alex Evans maintained that the property purchase was essential to the long-term sustainability of the district, while board president John Wyro insisted that owning the parcel was critical for the district as it negotiated for a station 46 partner. "We need to control this piece of property," said Wyro.

"I don't know what we're controlling," responded an exasperated Weil, who cast the only negative vote against the purchase agreement.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District is expected to present a revised fire station partnership agreement to MOFD, and Lafayette has formed an Emergency Services Task Force to investigate delivery of fire and emergency services.

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