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If at First You Don't Succeed...

By Nick Marnell

At a sparsely attended town hall meeting Aug. 20, firefighters, public officials and Lafayette residents listened to a presentation by Fitch and Associates, a fire and emergency medical service consulting firm, on the state of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. Jim Broman, the Fitch representative, succinctly summed up the district's plight. "The model is not sustainable," he said.

The fire district suffered revenue losses of nearly \$32 million between 2008 and 2012 thanks to a drop in property tax revenue. But expenses continued to rise, especially district pension and health care costs. Measure Q, a ballot initiative proposing a parcel tax that would have brought the district \$17 million a year, was defeated in November 2012. ConFire

responded by destaffing seven engine companies and closing five fire stations, including station 16 in Lafayette. Fitch was hired to assess alternative models of providing fire and emergency medical services to the district.

Though the revenue shortfall was the gorilla in the meeting room, Broman did indicate that there may be some area for improvement in district operations. His slide show depicted an example of an alternative deployment system, using a staffing model based upon peak service demand. But Broman stressed that Fitch had not come up with a final analysis; the project was only one-third complete. "We did not come tonight to give you the answers," he said.

He then fielded audience questions.

"Should ConFire be broken up, and Lafayette join the Moraga-Orinda Fire District?" That dynamic is not part of this study, said Broman.

"Can fire service be funded by a combination of taxes and user fees?" Broman stressed that the key issue with user fees is the low, 55 percent collection rate.

"There is a huge revenue inequity in the district. Lafayette pays too much!" Broman blamed Proposition 13. "That's what caused the inequity, and ConFire cannot solve it," he said.

"Are you looking at how the district is run?" That has been raised a number of times, noted Broman. "Yes, governance will be addressed," he said.

"Will any recommendations not require any additional funding?" Fitch may find some efficiencies, he said, but there is not enough revenue

to operate at the level that the community expects.

Addressing the revenue problem, Supervisor Candace Andersen spoke about the possibility that the county will place an initiative similar to Measure Q on the ballot in 2014. She was asked by Lafayette resident Jim Cunha why Measure Q failed in the first place.

"Why exactly was it turned down?" he said. "Are you going to poll residents and ask if they would now support this? If you're going to determine where the public stands today?" Another speaker suggested forming a community outreach group to help strategize the campaign for a new parcel tax.

In fiscal year 2014-15, district pension costs will rise to \$23 million, \$9 million over the prior year. Some-

thing more than a tweaking of district operations will be needed to cover that expense increase.

The Fitch and Associates study may be a critical component of a county strategy to convince district residents that more of their help is needed.



Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meeting:

Wednesday, Sept. 18

(Sept. 4 meeting was canceled)

(Go to www.mofd.org as the meeting date approaches for location and more information)

Lamorinda Fire News Briefs

By Nick Marnell

MOFD Board Meeting

The fire prevention division of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District provides a wide range of services, both to district residents and businesses as well as to other public agencies. Examples include fire and life safety inspections, fire hazard abatement and the issuance of operational permits. Fees for these services have not been raised since 2005 and some do not reflect the true cost of providing the services.

Under the direction of fire marshal Kathy Leonard the staff conducted a fee analysis and presented an updated itemization to the board at the Aug. 21 district meeting. The revised fee schedule, which will take effect with a new fire code in January, should produce an additional \$50,000 in annual revenue, said Leonard.

The board unanimously approved the implementation of the new fee schedule.

Three directors – John Wyro, Kathy Famulener and Fred Weil – attended the Aug. 20 Lafayette town hall meeting (see article this page) and shared their observations. Most of the board discussion focused on the possibility of the county proposing a ballot issue for a parcel tax to benefit the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, which has cut back services in the past year because of a revenue shortfall. Weil maintained that a parcel tax would never pass unless the supervisors showed – through an independent study like the Fitch report – how serious the financial conditions are in the fire district.

Director Alex Evans cautioned the

board to not harshly judge ConFire's situation. "Someday, we may have to make similar decisions," he said.

SAFER Grant for ConFire?

Chief Daryl Louder provided a burst of potentially good financial news regarding the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District.

At the Aug. 12 Advisory Fire Commission Meeting, Louder said that the district will apply for a SAFER grant (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. If the \$10 million grant is awarded, the funds will be used to staff 27 firefighter positions, restore services to two closed fire stations and possibly avert the shutdown of another station in January.

SAFER grants are awarded to fire agencies that have experienced - or may experience - service reductions. The Moraga-Orinda Fire District was awarded a SAFER grant of \$1.1 million in July.

New ConFire Chief

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors announced the selection of Jeff Carman, assistant fire chief of the Roseville Fire Department, to succeed Daryl Louder as chief of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. At the Lafayette town hall meeting, Carman said that he will start Oct. 21.

Carman is a graduate of Cal State Long Beach, with a Bachelor of Arts in public administration; he began his fire service career with the Roseville

Fire Department in September 1984. In addition to his supervision of the operations division, he has overseen the department's hazmat program and special operations programs.

"Jeff comes with strong leadership, management and fire operations experience," said Supervisor Candace Andersen, who was impressed by Carman's insight into dealing collaboratively with district stakeholders. "He recognizes that Contra Costa Fire needs to look at different, innovative ways of providing our fire and emergency medical services in order for us to remain a sustainable agency," she said. Roseville, a Placer County city of over 100,000 residents, is approximately 20 miles northeast of Sacramento.

Civic News Moraga

Kevin Mooney: Orinda's Loss is Moraga's Gain

... continued from page A4

"It is very satisfying to see that guy go away for a while, especially in a community where you know the people," he added.

Mooney believes that community policing and crime prevention are key to keeping the town great and, whether our teens like it or not, stopping unruly and underage parties is part of the job. "Kids who drink at parties drive drunk and crash," he said sadly. It happens in all three Lamorinda communities. "Every year somebody dies needlessly because of drunk driving. It's tragic. It's an im-

portant part of the job to make sure that when people are enjoying themselves they do it safely."

But he prefers to chase the real bad guys.

A former Marine Corp officer, Mooney spent 29 years on active and reserve duty; he was also a training officer with the sheriff. Priebe is already hinting at possible future management opportunities but, for now, Mooney will patrol the streets of Moraga; his first objective is to get to know everybody and gain their trust, just as he did in Orinda.

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