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The Far Reach of MOFD

By Nick Marnell



Left to right: Russ Stratton, Terry Wolff Stratton, Mike Lacy and Darren Bourne. Photo Ohlen Alexander

Into captain Mike Lacy's office rushed Moraga-Orinda Fire District battalion chief Sean Perkins.

"Are you ready to go?" asked Perkins.

By late afternoon Aug. 21, Lacy, along with two firefighters and an engineer, headed out state route 120 to Groveland ... and the Rim Fire.

It was Lacy's first day as MOFD captain.

The emotions of the crew as it rolled toward Yosemite Valley ran the gamut, he said. Am I ready? Will we be able to put this thing out? What can our one engine, and its 800 gal-

lons of water, possibly do to combat this monster of a fire?

Upon arrival at the command center Lacy's team was given its assignment: Pine Mountain Lake. Their job was to protect homes should the fire circle the lake.

"Most of the people had evacuated," said Lacy. "And it was impressive how prepared they were. They knew from experience. The defensible space around those homes was A-plus."

But how do you prepare for the human reaction?

"Please save my toys and my house," pleaded a young boy. At the

same time, Lacy was speaking with the boy's father. "What's the reality?" the dad asked. "Is my house going to be here?"

It was a happy ending for the Pine Mountain Lake area. There were no casualties, and no structures were lost.

Terry Wolff Stratton owns a home there. "We were following the fire minute by minute on Facebook," said Stratton. "We saw the MOFD firefighters along the town border. My husband and I would like to thank them."

"It's 100 percent professional," said Lacy, speaking of the reciprocal aid among fire agencies. "If something like that ever happened in our district, the firefighters from Groveland will come here. Our citizens will receive the exact same treatment in return."

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meeting:
Wednesday, Sept. 18
(Go to www.mofd.org as the meeting date approaches for location and more information)

Reality Is Setting In

MOFD acknowledges painful times ahead

By Nick Marnell

Director Steve Anderson of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District stated at its Sept. 4 finance committee workshop that the district must consider implementing something once deemed unimaginable: service reductions, including the laying off of employees.

Anderson, a member of the MOFD finance committee along with Alex Evans, explained the district's financial situation simply and clearly: "We cannot sustain the losses of the next two years. It is critical that something be done." Anderson conducted the workshop that included interim fire chief Stephen Healy and administrative services director Gloriam Sasser; director Evans was absent.

The district called the workshop to present to the public its revised 2013-14 fiscal year budget, and its updated long range financial plan. Some of the highlights included a \$500,000 greater than expected operating loss for fiscal year 2012-13, mostly due to overtime charges, resulting in a loss of \$1.3 million; a projected operating loss of \$1.2 million for 2013-14, and a projected loss of over \$2.6 million for 2014-15, mainly attributed to a jump in pension charges of over \$2 million.

Anderson said that he plans to confront the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association, the district's pension plan administrator, and demand an explanation as to exactly how the pension increase was calculated. "They maybe need to review how they're calculating the discount rate," he said. "If I don't like the way they arrived at the number, I'll have an issue."

CCCERA changed the discount rate used in calculating unfunded pension liability from 7.75 percent to 7.25 percent, effective July 2014. As a result, the total CCCERA unfunded pension liability of the district rose from \$24 million to \$46 million.

As to what recourse is available to the district if it has an issue with the discount rate, Marilyn Leedom, the chief executive officer of CCCERA, did not return a call seeking comment.

According to Anderson, as far as reigning in district expenses, everything is on the table. And though he was not stating district policy, he indicated that even the laying off of employees needs to be considered by the board. "Maybe cutting salaries, maybe cutting staffing," said Anderson. "Employees, the union, citizens ... we're all in this together."

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District will see its pension charges increase \$9 million in the next fiscal year. In response to its bleak financial situation, the district closed five fire stations this year, with possibly one more to shut down in January. The county Board of Supervisors commissioned a study by fire consultant Fitch and Associates to find alternate ways for ConFire to deliver fire and emergency services in its district.

The MOFD board has long maintained that service reductions are simply not acceptable. However, based upon the financial information recently made available, the board will be faced with making some of the most challenging decisions in the district's 16 year history.

The next MOFD board meeting is Wednesday, Sept. 18.

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