

Breaking Up Is Hard To Do

By Nick Marnell

The nascent Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force is discovering that the questions are far more complicated than it may have realized.

In June, frustrated with the performance of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, the city of Lafayette formed the task force to assess alternative delivery of fire and emergency medical service to its residents. The precipitating event was seemingly the January closure of fire station 16 in northeast Lafayette, with city residents nonetheless on the hook for the full amount of the property tax allocation to ConFire.

"One-third of the city has no fire service, and that is unacceptable," said Councilmember Brandt Anderson who, along with Councilmember Traci Reilly, co-chairs the task force that includes an additional six volunteer Lafayette residents.

At the first task force meeting three study groups were formed. The fire and medical services group was to investigate the various availabilities of fire service, including partnerships with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, ConFire or another entity. The finance group was to evaluate the long-term financial sustainability of MOFD and ConFire, and what amount of tax revenue Lafayette needs to allocate to fire service. And the process and politics group would determine what the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission requires of Lafayette to detach from ConFire, and the actual process for doing so.

The task force at its next meeting unanimously adopted its so-called Problem Statement: "What fire and emergency medical services do people need? How much are they willing to pay? Are those services financially sustainable?"

The first committee reports poured in at the Sept. 17 task force meeting. And the session concluded with only more unanswered questions, mostly regarding a fire partner and the ubiquitous public pension issue.

"There needs to be some means in place to deal with this unfunded pension liability," said Andersson.

Should the city detach from ConFire, a method must be worked out with the county to allocate Lafayette's pro-rated share of the district's unfunded pension liability, which looms at more than \$400 million. "We need to go anywhere and meet with anybody to try to solve this problem," said finance group member Jim Cunha.

In terms of the structure of the new Lafayette fire service, sentiment seemed to favor a contract model. "That way we'll fund our fair share for fire service; we'll pay only what we contract for," said Cunha.

Lafayette is not unfamiliar with public safety contracts; its police protection is provided on a contract basis by the county sheriff's office.

"If we do go the contract route, who will we contract with?" asked Reilly. Possible partners mentioned by the fire and medical services group were MOFD, Cal Fire, the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District and ConFire.

Outgoing ConFire Chief Daryl Louder indicated that he'd be amenable to serving Lafayette on a contract basis; that decision, however, rests with the county Board of Supervisors. "It makes for a cleaner system," he said.

As it is early in the potential detachment process, there was nothing new to report from the process and politics group.

With all of the possibilities for delivering fire and emergency medical service, and the many unanswered questions that have ensued, it is becoming evident that the spinning off of a subsidiary from its parent company in the public sector is an extremely elaborate and complex process.



Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meeting:

Wednesday, Oct. 2

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

Lamorinda Fire News Briefs

By Nick Marnell

New ConFire Chief Given Heads-Up

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors formally approved Jeff Carman as the new fire chief of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District at its Sept. 17 meeting. His start date was confirmed as Oct. 21.

But in a requisite sign of the times, controversy over his pension preceded the board's unanimous vote.

Because Carman worked for the City of Roseville Fire Department, and contributed to its pension plan, he will transition into the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association as a legacy employee; meaning, since he was originally hired prior to Jan. 1, 2013, he is not subject to the stricter rules of the California Public Employees' Pension Reform Act. "His retirement was one issue we had no control over, and we wanted to make sure that was on the record," said supervisor Karen Mitchoff.

Rollie Katz, supervising business agent of Public Employees Union, Local No.1, groused about the vacation benefit that Carman received. "I can't remember anyone (in our union) starting with 80 hours of vacation credit, or being given seven weeks vacation when they start. It may simply be a means to enhance one's pension," he said.

ConFire has an unfunded pension liability, including other post-employment benefits, of more than \$400 million.

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District carries more than \$80 million in unfunded OPEB and pension liability. **Moraga-Orinda Fire District Approves Operating Budget**

Though the Moraga-Orinda Fire District passed a 2013-14 fiscal year budget Sept. 18 that included no serv-

ice reductions, an ominous tone emanated from board members.

The budget, prepared by interim fire chief Stephen Healy and new administrative services director Gloriann Sasser, forecast an operating loss of \$950,000 and a capital loss of over \$500,000. As a result, the district will dip into its reserve fund for the third consecutive fiscal year, dropping the fund to approximately \$1.2 million.

District revenue increased thanks to projected higher property tax receipts and as a result of an award granted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to fund four firefighter positions. The hiring of the new firefighters is forecast to reduce district overtime charges by more than \$700,000. However, contributions to the employee retirement fund increased to more than \$3.3 million.

The capital budget was most affected by the purchase of the property to be used for potential fire station 46. The district's purchase of the \$1.2 million parcel at 1035 Lorinda Lane in Lafayette closed in July.

As director Steve Anderson pointed out at the recent finance committee meeting, these losses are not sustainable by the district. "We need to do something different," said board president John Wyro.

The retirement charges foisted on the district by the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association will increase another \$2 million in fiscal year 2014-15. "These changes wrought by CCCERA need to be responded to," said director Fred Weil. "What are we going to do structurally?"

The board scheduled a community budget workshop for Oct. 2, in order to seek public input for changes to be made in district operations. "The things we are considering are significant," said Anderson.

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