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Tough Decisions Ahead

By Nick Marnell

Director Steve Anderson was determined to keep the tone of the Oct. 2 Moraga-Orinda Fire District public workshop positive. He accomplished his goal by delivering a negative exhortation.

"The purpose of tonight's public comment period is not for you to get up and pontificate about a litany of woes from the past," he said. "I don't want to hear about (the old pension formula) - what if we hadn't done that? That's old news. I'm looking for new information." And though the board relaxed Anderson's demand and allowed anyone in the Moraga audience to pontificate without restriction, the public did offer several positive suggestions for changes to district operations.

But first Stephen Healy, interim fire chief, conducted a presentation on possible new staffing models. He discussed two options, both of which reduced the number of on-duty personnel from 19 to 17 among the district's five fire stations. Healy clearly favored the model that included keeping all five stations open, including five fully-staffed engines, one full-time ambulance and three cross-staffed ambulances. That option requires the district to purchase an additional ambulance for \$160,000.

The district currently operates five engines, two full-time ambulances and one cross-staffed ambulance. A cross-staffed ambulance shares personnel with the station's fire engine, whereas a full-time ambulance has a dedicated, two-person crew on duty at all times.

Dick Olsen, Moraga resident and past MOFD director, praised Healy's presentation, noting that it was the same model that he put together in 1997 when the district was formed.

"If you reduce service, you hurt the taxpayers," he cautioned the board. "If you cut salaries and benefits, you hurt the firefighters. A combination of those two alternatives will share the pain. That seems to be the fairest approach." Olsen also advised that the district could contract with Cal Fire, or even with a private fire and emergency services provider.

A tax increase was proposed, albeit with an interesting twist.

Moraga resident William Dick offered that, if there are service reductions in the district, property owners may be faced with higher insurance premiums. Find out what that premium increase would be, he said, and place a parcel tax on the ballot for that same amount instead. "At least the tax would be deductible," said Dick.

The district called the workshop because it is considering cuts to district operations and it requested cost-saving ideas from the public. MOFD has run at an operating loss each of the past two years and forecasts a loss of \$950,000 for fiscal year 2013-14. Retirement costs, \$5.8 million this year, are scheduled to rise to \$8 million in 2014-15.

"This board doesn't like the fact that we have to make hard choices. But we're prepared to do that, to maintain the sustainability of the district as well as the sustainability of the excellent service that we do provide," said director Fred Weil who acknowledged, "Something has to change."

The next public workshop is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on Oct. 16 at the Orinda Community Center, 28 Orinda Way.

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