

Healy Unplugged

By Nick Marnell

Stephen Healy was appointed fire chief of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District Oct. 16. The Lamorinda Weekly talked with district residents and presented the chief some of their questions and concerns as he ushers in his new administration.

LW: Ashley, a junior at Saint Mary's College, wants to know your number one goal as the district's new fire chief.

Healy: Presently, my primary goal as fire chief is to ensure the fiscal sustainability of the district.

LW: Ray lives on Ivy Drive in south Orinda and he wants to know what will be the biggest difference in the district now that you are in charge.

Healy: The district will be focused more on fire prevention than ever before.

LW: Rheem Valley's Susetta wants assurance that the fire department is large enough to handle a major disaster. And Jamie, an Orinda nurse, wants to know what residents can do to help prevent that major disaster.

Healy: A major disaster would quickly overwhelm our local resources. That's why we are a participating member of regional and federal disaster teams. In other words, we give help because we may need it someday. The best way that residents can help prevent a disaster is by following the guidelines of the Firewise initiative. You can learn more when you go to www.mofd.org and click on Fire Prevention.

LW: Moraga advertising professional Jason asks if the district is responsible for fire prevention in the free space along the Valle Vista staging area. And Canyon mom Denise wants to know if there are plans for preventive maintenance in the Canyon natural areas.

Healy: The land around the Valle Vista staging area is owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District. We cooperate each spring to make sure that the 50 miles of fire trails are graded, and the district has always been responsive to our concerns regarding vegetation management. The land around Canyon is both publicly and privately owned. I am not aware of any plans for preventive maintenance, although we will continue to work with residents to abate weeds and make their homes safer.

LW: Orinda resident Michele wants to know why the district does not enforce the weed abatement policy as diligently as it used to.

Healy: We froze the fire marshal's position for two years because of budget cuts. Our new fire marshal, Kathy Leonard, just rewrote the district's fire prevention ordinance, which will strengthen our ability to ensure that dead vegetation is cleared

in inhabited areas.

LW: Markl, a Moraga information systems manager, wonders why the district hasn't hired or purchased cows and sheep to graze along the weedy hillside below Ascot Drive. Commercial real estate agent Gordon had the same question for the dry areas of Orinda – only he suggested buying goats to do the job.

Healy: Good questions. Using cows or goats is a great way to keep annual grasses down. It is not without some controversy though, because of the environmental concerns of overgrazing. I've asked one of my battalion chiefs to further explore the idea, and what our role might be in it.

LW: Don, a rower who lives off of Miner Road, wants to know if you recommend a particular fire alert system for the home; one that will contact MOFD at the slightest sense of trouble.

Healy: I would suggest three things: do online research to see what is out there, talk to your neighbors and find out what their experience has been, and negotiate a good deal from the start.

LW: Back to Saint Mary's, sophomore Kayla wants to know if the buildings at the college undergo routine fire prevention maintenance.

Healy: Many of the buildings at Saint Mary's College have fire sprinklers - including all of the labs and dormitories. Saint Mary's is responsible to install and maintain the sprinklers. My experience has been that the college is very responsible when it comes to student safety.

LW: Charles, in Orinda law enforcement, echoed a concern of many residents – are there enough firefighters in the district?

Healy: There are enough firefighters on duty each day to fulfill the mission of the fire district: to provide the highest level of emergency and public service in response to the needs of our community.

LW: And finally, Sleepy Hollow attorney Kellian presented the closing statement. Can you protect us sufficiently without asking us for more money?

Healy: We are able to protect the community. To ask the community for more money is a public policy decision that only our board of directors can make.



Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meeting:
Wednesday, Nov. 6

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

Lamorinda Fire News Briefs

By Nick Marnell

Is Rock Bottom in the Rearview Mirror?

The county Board of Supervisors unanimously ruled at its Oct. 22 meeting that the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District will not have to close an additional fire station in January.

"The picture is brighter, but we have a long way to go," said David Twa, county administrator, who presented the board an update on ConFire finances. Twa stated that he thinks the district's financial situation has bottomed out, and that he sees modest recovery ahead. He credited a projected 5 percent increase in assessed property values – which will result in more tax revenue – and a \$4.65 million federal grant as the main contributors to the rosier picture for fiscal year 2013-14.

Yet Twa cautioned that major obstacles remain for the district, including increased pension liability and health costs, unfunded infrastructure maintenance and the continued depletion of reserve balances, which he said will be close to exhausted by 2017. And he also warned that his financial model assumes only the 23 fire stations currently in use; if the district expects to go back to 30 fully-operating stations and companies, it could not happen using the projected revenue stream.

ConFire chief Jeff Carman recognized the challenges that lie ahead, yet he maintained a positive outlook. "Based on what I see," he said, "I'm sure we are on the way to becoming a healthier organization."

Another Option for Lafayette?

The city of San Pablo, in reaction to the financial difficulties of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, requested that the Board of Supervisors consider that the city implement a response squad to provide emergency medical service to the San Pablo service area. The squad would supplement the heavy demand placed on ConFire station 70, and the cost of the program would be borne by the city. The board, acting as the ConFire board of directors, authorized the district to negotiate program terms with the city.

After the meeting, supervisor and ConFire director Candace Andersen was asked if it made sense for Lafayette, a city within her district, to consider providing a similar type of supplemental service. Lafayette, also served by ConFire but frustrated with its performance, is investigating alternative delivery of fire and emergency medical service to its residents.

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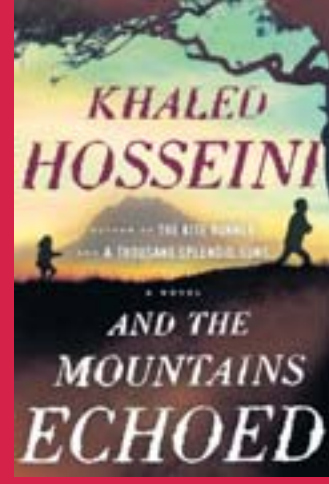
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