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Soaring Pension Debt Confirmed

By Nick Marnell

For the second consecutive district meeting, a guest speaker told the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board news that it did not want to hear.

The latest retirement charge foisted on MOFD by its pension plan manager stunned the district with a nearly \$2 million expense increase next fiscal year; the district will pay 80 cents for each dollar of non-over-time payroll into its retirement fund, up from 53 cents this year. To verify this inconvenient truth, the district hired Bartel Associates, LLC of San Mateo to do a review of the actuarial valuation of its pension plan. Company president John Bartel delivered his analysis to the MOFD board on Nov. 20, but his lengthy presentation was short on good news.

Bartel explained that the MOFD pension plan is heavily weighted toward retired members; 80 percent of the district's pension obligation is committed to retirees and 20 percent is earmarked for active employees. "That is one of the highest ratios we've ever seen when it comes to pension benefits," he said. Because the number of active district employees is going down, while the number of retirees – and the benefits due them – continues to rise, the percentage of payroll required to fund the retirement account necessarily rises.

The largest driver of the district's required contribution increase is the lowered discount rate applied to pension liabilities by the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association, the district's pension plan manager; the rate dropped from 7.75 percent to 7.25 percent in 2013. As of Dec. 31, the district had accrued a pension liability of \$165 million, offset by only \$120 million in assets, resulting in an unfunded

liability of \$45 million.

One possibility for reducing the district's contribution rate is for the district to ask CCCERA to take into account the actual changes in the MOFD employment figures, which are lower than those projected by Segal Company, the county's actuary. But Bartel said that any change in the district employment numbers would not make much of a dent on the overall county totals, on which CCCERA bases its assumptions. CCCERA probably would not respond to the district's request anyway "because they do not consider you as their client," he told the board.

Bartel concluded by stating that the increased retirement plan contribution demanded for fiscal year 2014-15 seemed consistent with the district's demographics and the assumptions made by CCCERA.

The reality is that, if MOFD remains a participant in the CCCERA system, the district has no recourse and is stuck with the increased retirement charges. As a partial offset the district has eliminated a battalion chief's position and has implemented firefighter staffing cuts to save more than \$800,000 so far this fiscal year.

The board need not be concerned about more bad news arising at its next scheduled meeting; the district canceled the Dec. 4 public session.

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meetings:
Wednesday, Dec. 4 canceled
check website for updates
 (Go to www.mofd.org as the meeting date approaches for location and more information)

Service Models Evolving

By Nick Marnell

The Lamorinda fire agencies have recently tweaked their service models as both fire districts take steps to deal with troubling economic realities.

As part of its march toward sustainability, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District began operating under a revised staffing model in early November. The new plan, announced by fire chief Stephen Healy, employs 17 on-duty firefighters daily, down from 19 as had been deployed since the district's inception in 1997. MOFD now runs one full-time ambulance, down from two, with three additional cross-staffed ambulances on call throughout the district. As a result, the district is expected to save more than \$500,000 this fiscal year.

"We understand the need to create savings as soon as possible, and that's why we moved in a timely manner," said Vince Wells, president of Local 1230, United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County, whose group met and conferred with MOFD and quickly approved the new staffing model, first presented to the public in October.

Two weeks into the new system, Healy confirmed that the three cross-staffed ambulances were running out of the three Orinda stations, with the full-time ambulance out of station 41 in Moraga. As for any early, unforeseen glitches? "None," Healy said.

Wells, despite having agreed with the implementation of the

new staffing model, maintains that having two fewer on-duty firefighters will result in service cuts in the district. "We are going to be keeping track," he said.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, with serious sustainability concerns of its own, tested another type of cost-saving program in September.

A two-person squad, comprised of one engineer or firefighter/paramedic and one firefighter/emergency medical technician, was placed into service in the district to provide emergency medical response during the peak of the wildfire season. The idea was to have ConFire's larger engines and crews available for more critical structure and vegetation incidents. Since a reduced number of personnel were sent on the EMS calls, in a lighter, more maneuverable vehicle, cost savings would accrue to the district.

While potential dollar savings were not available, initial data from the first 90 days of the program showed that the use of the squad allowed a district ladder truck to be available 40 percent more often to respond to other calls, including fires. Based on this success, the district is requesting from the county Board of Supervisors that the program be extended an additional 90 days.

"I think it's a good concept," said ConFire chief Jeff Carman. "We are going to do everything we can to be as efficient as possible."

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