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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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