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Good News on Two Counts

By Nick Marnell

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District announced March 7 that its property tax revenue projection for fiscal year 2014-15 increased 5.9 percent over fiscal year 2013-14. As a result the district's revenue is projected to increase more than \$500,000 over what was budgeted. The revised figure was provided to the district by the Contra Costa County tax assessor's office.

The district also announced that the rate of increase of its contribution to the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association has dropped dramatically beyond fiscal year 2014-15. Since 2012, the district has absorbed double-digit annual increases in its retirement contribution rate; starting in 2015-16, the rate increases 0.42 percent, with a decrease of at least 2.64 percent in each of the succeeding four years. The retirement contribution payment is the district's largest expense item after wages and salaries.

The announcements were made the same day that the district said it will enter into mediation with its firefighters' union. "Everything we do is connected," said board president John Wyro. "Whether we had heard this news or not, though, we were going to proceed with mediation." Fire chief Stephen Healy noted, "It certainly takes some pressure off both sides." The mediation process is expected to commence in late April.



Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meetings:

Wednesday, March 19
Wednesday, April 18

check website for updates

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

Supervisor Criticizes MOFD Board

By Nick Marnell

A prosaic Feb. 25 Board of Supervisors meeting was jolted when chair Karen Mitchoff lashed out at the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors.

One of the frequently mentioned public complaints uncovered by fire consultant Fitch and Associates was that the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District needed a change in its governance model; the Board of Supervisors acts as the ConFire board of directors. "When I hear comments like that, I take them to mean that we're not doing a good job," said Mitchoff. "And I resent that." She then brought up the MOFD board. "That is a perfect example of a special district with a poor governance structure," she said.

Mitchoff later explained her remarks.

"I was specifically referring to the MOFD board members who gave Nowicki the money that he got," she said. "You shouldn't make more money in retirement than you did the day before you retired." In 2008 the MOFD board approved an amendment to fire chief Peter Nowicki's employment contract that allowed the chief to sell back various accrued benefits and count the dollar amount toward his pension.

"Those were well-intentioned board members who did not know

what questions to ask and consequently made a poor decision," said Mitchoff. She blamed the MOFD board's action as one of the main reasons for the failure of Measure Q, the 2012 ConFire parcel tax initiative. "It was because of the poor public perception of public employee pensions," she said.

"Any reference to Nowicki is accurate," said MOFD board president John Wyro who, along with Fred Weil, sat on the board both then and now. "We learned something from it. But that was five years ago, and right now we have other things that we are trying to work out." The district is in labor negotiations with its firefighters; the board declared an impasse in January and on March 7 announced that it accepted the union's offer to enter into mediation.

Rather than spend time speculating over changes in the district's governance structure, Supervisor Candace Andersen also chose to keep the focus on current events. "We need to take care of the business in front of us before we go into that sideways discussion," she said.

MOFD fire chief Stephen Healy attempted to put things in perspective. "I don't consider the Board of Supervisors to be any better or worse than our board," he said, "or vice versa."

Lamorinda Fire News Briefs

By Nick Marnell

Breathing Room for ConFire

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District received a \$9.6 million dollar grant from the Federal Emergency Management Association in February, and the district plans to use the money to hire 27 new firefighters over the next two years. The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant provides funding directly to fire departments to help them increase or maintain their number of trained, front line firefighters - as long as the money is used to hire only entry level employees. ConFire chief Jeff Carman cautioned that there are also restrictions on how the district can deploy the new firefighters.

If ConFire hires three firefighters and opens an engine company with those three, one will be promoted to captain and one more to engineer/operator. The incremental costs over the entry level salaries and benefits are not covered by the SAFER grant. "Those costs must be absorbed by the district and right now, we don't have the capacity to cover those costs," said Carman.

In addition, the district cannot lay off firefighters during the two-year SAFER period, and vacancies that arise through attrition must be filled within a reasonable amount of time.

At its March 11 meeting, the Board of Supervisors planned to accept the grant. The district's strategic planning committee will recommend over the coming months how the new firefighters will best be deployed.

... continued on page A11



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