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Proposed District Budget Riles Union

By Nick Marnell

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the firefighters union reached a tentative agreement on a new contract in April, and at the May 20 district meeting, the 36-page memorandum of understanding was approved by the board of directors. But a pall of resentment hung over the rank and file.

"This is not a contact that we are happy with," said Vince Wells, Local 1230 president. Wells maintained that the district's financial situation was never as bleak as it was portrayed during the negotiations, and he expressed cynicism that a balanced general fund was now projected for every year of the district's revised long range financial plan. The new financial forecast only verified the union's belief that the district finances were never as dire as projected, noted Wells.

"We hope that in future negotiations similar tactics are not used," he said.

The MOFD directors did not respond to Wells' comments. The MOU was approved by a 4-1 vote, the dissenting vote cast by director Steve Anderson, who has steadfastly objected to the automatic wage increases built into future years of the new labor agreement. Starting July 1, 2015, base salaries per the MOU are set to increase 1 percent with a 4 percent increase in each of the two succeeding years. The firefighters accepted a 3.5 percent pay cut for one year beginning this July. Gloriann Sasser, administrative services director, then led a presentation on the 2014-15 fiscal year district budget, projecting that for the first time in three years the district will operate in the black. Total district revenue for 2014-15 is projected at \$22.2 million, with total expenditures - including capital expenditures and debt service fund expenditures - equaling \$21.7 million.

Those numbers only added to Wells' chagrin.

"Next year's financial forecast shows a surplus of around the same amount the district will be saving with the 3.5 percent pay cut," he said. "A reduction in salary is not the way to balance the district's budget."

Fire chief Stephen Healy said that he appreciated the effort and cooperation of the union throughout the negotiations but he did acknowledge the uneasiness that pervaded the talks. "The process of concession bargaining was very difficult for both sides," he said.

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