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MOFD Increases Fire Season Staffing

By Nick Marnell

The fire season is off to an ominous start and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District has bulked up to confront it.

The board of directors unanimously approved fire chief Stephen Healy's recent request for an increase in minimum daily staffing from 17 to 19 firefighters through the end of November, which will allow the station 45 ambulance to be fully staffed during the wildfire season.

"This gives us increased operational capacity," said Healy. Since Medic 45 will be staffed full time, the crew at station 44 will no longer be primarily used on ambulance calls. As a result, the station 44 engine will be available 99 percent of the time during the fire season.

Already this summer two fires damaged homes in Lamorinda, and in July the district suppressed four vegetation fires. "Everything is under stress from three years of drought," said Healy, who noted that Northern California has experienced 11 significant fires this season as opposed to three in Southern California. The chief added that historically, the worst fires occur in October and November.

The district estimates that the extra fire season staffing will cost \$250,000. But thanks to increased property tax revenue and savings realized from the new labor contract, the district projected a general fund surplus of more than \$400,000 before the additional personnel expense.

The firefighters union supported the action, but it admonished the district to take the time to evaluate its financial situation before making any long term decisions on staffing numbers, including the hiring of single-role paramedics instead of firefighters. "Before permanently restoring staffing back to 19 we feel it is equally important to look at restoring salary and benefits to our employees," said MOFD union representative Mark DeWeese.

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