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MOFD Division 1 Race: Public vs. Private

By Nick Marnell



Kathleen Famulener

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors is charged with policing the relationship between the taxpayers who fund the district and the management that runs it. In November voters in MOFD Division 1 will choose between incumbent Kathleen Famulener and challenger Nathan Bell for their division director. The differences between the candidates are palpable.

"If understanding how to fight fires is required, then, no, I'm not qualified for the job," said Bell. "But if it's about managing a \$20 million operation, then I'm extremely qualified." The Harvard Business School graduate and private equity professional stressed his experience running companies, including chairing five boards and negotiating with four unions. He then threw down the gauntlet.

"I don't think it's healthy to have public employees managing public companies," he said.

That characterization defines Bell's opponent. "I come from a large family experienced in public service, including both fire and police departments," said Famulener, deputy district

attorney of Alameda County since 1977. "I understand both public service and public safety. And I understand transparency in dealing with the public." She talked about her seven years on the board of De La Salle High School where she helped develop a 15-year business strategy, which is what she said she intends to do at MOFD.

"My main goal was to finish the labor contract," she said, speaking of her first year on the MOFD board. "Now I want to develop a 15-year strategic plan with the firefighters' union."

The new labor contract, ratified in April, allows the district to replace up to 12 firefighters with single-role paramedics at a much lower pay scale. "I am supportive of going to the single-role paramedics, as soon as possible," said Bell. "If we do, it's highly unlikely that the firefighters will ever get their jobs back," countered Famulener. "I'm not in favor of the single-role model. We live in a high danger zone and we need our firefighters. We shouldn't be getting rid of them."

Famulener praised the district for doing a good job despite staffing cuts this year from 19 to 17 firefighters on duty each day. "But we must get back to 19," she said. (The district approved a temporary staffing increase to 19 through this year's fire season.)

"I value my home," said Bell. "I do want a quick response time. But we already have good coverage." He noted that the only way to fairly assess the situation is to do an analysis of comparables of other districts. "What are our revenues per firefighter? What about fire coverage per population? We must find out what we are judging ourselves against," he said.

The proposed fire station 46, a joint venture with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, brought out nuanced differences between candidates. "Financially, we'll be way ahead," said Famulener. "But from a public safety perspective, I don't know. I'll hold off on my opinion until I see all of the facts."

"My concern is the financial stability of ConFire," said the challenger. "What happens if they don't fund it? Do you want to get into bed with a weak partner? You do need to be concerned about the response times in north Orinda. But I would hold my nose and vote for it."

Neither candidate believes that a tax increase is necessary to cover the MOFD unfunded pension liability. "Raising taxes is akin to raising a white flag," said Bell. "Our tax base is sufficient. As homes continue to turn over, our tax base will grow significantly." Famulener agreed. "We will be able to take care of the unfunded liability problem from within our tax base," she said.

Two distinct views on district finances arose. Bell focused on financial management. "The financials are not straightforward," he said. "They show a \$30 million debt, but if you look at the footnotes, it's \$90 million. To build up \$90 million in unfunded liabilities? That's not prudent financial management."

"We're one of the wealthiest communities and our firefighters have the lowest pay of any neighboring agency. We should be taking better care of our first responders," said the incumbent.

"I am honored to be the first woman on the board. I've shown myself to be a strong, hard working female leader," said Famulener. "I hope the voters keep me in office."

"I am a completely private citizen. I'm not a public employee," said Bell. "My opponent is a public employee, and I do not think that is the proper profile of a member of a public governing board."

MOFD Division 1 roughly encompasses an area south and east of a line along Canyon Road, Moraga Road and St. Mary's Road in Moraga. A map of MOFD Division 1 is available at www.mofd.org/board/directors; then click on Division 1 Map.



Nathan Bell Photos provided

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