

Civic News Fire Districts

MOFD Division 1 Race: Public vs. Private

By Nick Marnell



Kathleen Famulener



Nathan Bell Photos provided

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*.

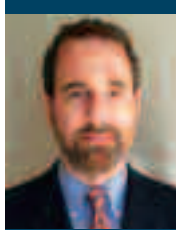


Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meeting:
Wednesday, Oct. 1
check website for updates
 (Go to www.mofd.org as the meeting date approaches for location and more information)

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ConFire Ambulance Proposal Passes First Test

By Nick Marnell

Two fire agencies in Contra Costa County provide their own emergency ambulance service. Jeff Carman, chief of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, wants to make it three. But Carman does not envision a model similar to the service provided by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District or the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District; he intends to pitch for the entire county ambulance contract, up for renewal next year. On Sept. 9 he made his case before the Board of Supervisors, acting as the ConFire board of directors, which gave him thumbs up to bid on the deal.

Carman based the financial calculations of his proposal on a presentation by The Ludwig Group, a Missouri-based fire and emergency medical services consultant. If ConFire won the ambulance contract, the report projected that the district will collect \$31.6 million in additional annual revenue. After \$29.3 million in expenses, the district would realize nearly \$2.3 million in excess revenue over expenses. "That was using conservative numbers," said company principal Gary Ludwig. "We used the highest payroll figures, the largest number of ambulances and the lowest collection rate per transport." He added that in the second year, ConFire could count on \$7.5 million more in federally backed reimbursements under the Ground Emergency Medical Transport program.

"Your estimates are too high," cautioned Supervisor John Gioia, who noted that Los Angeles County

receives only \$7.5 million annually in GEMT funds, as does Sacramento. "This report does not establish to me that this project makes money. The level of detail here does not provide certainty that it will not be a drain on the general fund."

American Medical Response holds the current county ambulance service contract and is a likely competitor in the bidding for the new one. Erik Rohde, AMR general manager for Contra Costa County, expressed skepticism over ConFire's proposed business model. "The plan overestimates the revenue and understates the expenses," he said. "It also calls for a reduction in the number of ambulances by nine. The system will be understaffed."

Despite the warnings, the supervisors voted 4-0 (Mary Piepho absent) for Carman to proceed with responding to the county request for proposals. The RFP process is expected to commence in January.

"I intend to take Ludwig's information and refine it," said Carman. "I will be sure to have the information be as specific as it can get by the time the RFP comes out."



ConFire Board of Directors' Meeting

Next meeting:
Wednesday, Oct. 1
check website for updates
 Board Chamber room 107,
 Administration Building,
 651 Pine St. Martinez
 (Agenda at <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>)

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