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## The Long and Winding Road

*By Nick Marnell*

Mergers and acquisitions are again the rage. In November, the company that produces Botox was absorbed by rival drug firm Actavis for \$66 billion. Oil service firm Halliburton recently paid \$35 billion to purchase competitor Baker Hughes. Both deals expect to close late next year. Not to be outdone, Lamorinda has its own quasi-merger in the works. The Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District announced a proposed consolidation of two fire stations in early 2013, with the resultant station 46 expected to save \$1 million in operating costs per year for each district.

"We are very close to an agreement that we can bring to our boards," said the MOFD fire chief. Except it wasn't current chief Stephen Healy who said that; those words were spoken by then-chief Randall Bradley in April, 2013.

The idea for a single fire station to replace MOFD station 43 in Orinda and ConFire station 16 in Lafayette was hatched by MOFD chief Jim Johnston in 1999. It went nowhere. But when the county closed ConFire station 16 because of a budget shortfall in 2012, and with MOFD station 43 requiring major renovations, ConFire chief Daryl Louder approached Bradley to reignite the station 46 concept. Bradley agreed and he took the consolidation idea to the MOFD board of directors, which gave him thumbs up to negotiate with ConFire.

But the county Board of Supervisors, acting as the ConFire board of directors, nixed the deal. The money to even partially fund the reopening of a closed station just wasn't there. "It was the right idea at the wrong time," said supervisor Federal Glover in May, 2013.

Subscribing to the theory that the right idea at the wrong time is still the right idea, MOFD president John Wyro worked to keep station 46 alive despite the loss of its obvious partner. He led the district in the formation of a joint powers agreement with Lafayette to purchase a parcel for the station site. He preached the benefits of station 46 to county and Lafayette officials who, upset with ConFire's performance, had formed a task force to consider alternative delivery of fire service. "I was concerned that there were opportunities being lost and that I needed to develop more information," he said.

The turning point came in March, when new ConFire chief Jeff Carman forced the hand of the Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force, which had considered recommending secession from ConFire. Before he presented an updated station 46 proposal to his board, Carman insisted on an answer from Lafayette officials: was the city committed to the district?

After hearing a dramatic presentation by assistant chief Alan Hartford on the state of affairs at ConFire, the task force recommended station 46 to the Lafayette City Council, which concurred. In June, the ConFire directors, based on rosier financial projections and a more thorough presentation by the chief, authorized Carman to negotiate an agreement with MOFD.

"We're close," said Carman at the Nov. 18 task force meeting. Once the operational structure of the new station is worked out with the firefighters' union, and other details, including task force feedback, are finalized, Carman expects that an agreement will be presented to both boards early next year. "I believe that this time, the supervisors will do the right thing, and approve the deal," said Lafayette fire commissioner Bill Granados, who accurately predicted that they would reject the proposal in 2013.

After the official approval, station 46 faces public scrutiny. A north Orinda grass roots group, The Committee to Save Honey Hill Fire Station, started a petition drive in November to stop the station 46 project, citing an increase in response times for Orinda and Moraga once station 43 closes. Michael Yim, a resident of El Castillo Lane, adjacent to the station 46 site, delivered a thoughtful presentation to the MOFD board at its Nov. 19 meeting requesting transparency on the progress of the construction of the new station.

An idea that has held course despite 15 years of wrinkles, delays and detours may finally come to fruition with the 2015 groundbreaking of station 46 - possibly before patients begin injecting Botox

supplied by its new parent company.

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