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One District, Indivisible

By Nick Marnell



Retired MOFD Director John Wyro Photo provided

The refrain "But that's the way we've always done it" has been the undoing of many a manager or company. As John Wyro relates, that phrase sparked the formation of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, from which he retired in December after nearly 17 years of service as district director.

A few months after Wyro's appointment as a director of the old Orinda Fire District, the fire chief walked into his office. "He handed me a copy of a budget and said that we needed to approve it that night," said Wyro. "I told him that I can't do that, and he said that was the way it's always been done. Needless to say, it didn't happen.

"As we dug into it," continued Wyro, "the more we realized that Orinda was subsidizing (the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District). We had old equipment, and most of all, no paramedics, and terrible response times. More often than not, (American Medical Response) had an ambulance in Walnut Creek responding to our emergencies. We started talking with Moraga and we decided we should become our own district. We put a group together and formed MOFD in 1997. Day one, we had paramedics staffing engines," which Wyro credited to the efforts of interim chief Mel Deardorf.

"John always believed that since the new Moraga-Orinda Fire District was now serving a larger constituency, it was truly one district serving

all residents equally," said Gordon Nathan, one of the original district directors.

MOFD made national headlines in 2009 when it was revealed that upon retirement fire chief Pete Nowicki spiked his pension to an amount significantly higher than his final salary. "It was my biggest mistake and disappointment," said Wyro, speaking of the board's approval of that retirement package. "My lack of feeling the need to go into the kind of depth necessary to investigate that situation, well ... it was a question I didn't ask and should have." The district has eliminated the spiking program in the fire chiefs' contracts.

Wyro left no doubt as to his top accomplishment. "It was bringing paramedics to Orinda," he said. "I know as a result of our efforts doing that, lives have been saved. There are people walking around today who wouldn't be if we hadn't done that."

Many think of Wyro's leadership in the fire station 46 joint venture between MOFD and ConFire. "I would like to have finished it, but I'll be at the hearings," he said. "I understand the process. I know the players in Lafayette, so I think I can help make it happen as a volunteer citizen. At a minimum, I'll be at every board meeting where that's a topic, and I'll be at the podium."

He would not validate the complaints of a grass roots committee that claims north Orinda response times will be increased if station 43 is razed and replaced by station 46. "The district represents a larger constituency than just the folks around station 43. When all is said and done and they see the facts, their arguments are going to wither," he said, again emphasizing the district as a single entity.

"It's good to have board turnover," said Wyro. "It was time for me to go, time to get a

different look at things." Though, he did say that he was prepared to file papers to run again, and that he would have served another term to finish up station 46 if no candidate surfaced whom he was happy with. "But, I am very comfortable with Brad (Barber) and I think he is going to be a very good director," he said.

MOFD director Fred Weil served 11 years on the board with Wyro. "It was always a pleasure to work with John, in part because he would speak directly to issues with no hidden motives or agendas," he said. "His focus has always been on the welfare of the whole district and its residents."

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