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MOFD to Consider Enhanced Service

By Nick Marnell

How to adjust - thanks to its vastly improved financial situation - is the latest challenge facing the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

Administrative services director Gloriann Sasser presented the district's long-range financial plan to the MOFD board at its May 20 meeting. The document showed a general fund balance that exceeds 10 percent of budgeted revenue by 2019 and total revenue exceeding expenditures in each year of the 15-year plan. Though the projections called for the payoff of the \$22 million remaining on its pension obligation bond, not reported were the district's \$17 million in unfunded retiree health benefits or an estimated \$40 million in unfunded pension costs. Increased property tax revenue, a district-friendly labor contract and lower employee retirement costs contributed to the rosy forecast, which Sasser said projects to a \$100 million surplus in 15 years.

Director Fred Weil then threw down the yellow caution flag.

"I am uncomfortable that we are more focused on saving money than we are on how we are going to provide long-term service in this district," said Weil. "Critics say save money, return money to the taxpayers. But I've never heard of a movement in the district to cut services." Weil pointed out that, with the reduction in daily staffing from 19 to 17 firefighters and the closure of Contra Costa County Fire Protection District station 16, five fewer firefighters serve the area of north Orinda and western Lafayette. "Our financial position is improving," he said. "But will this service model be adequate?"

Fire chief Stephen Healy said that he has put together the framework of a strategic plan for the district, but that a decision on station 46 - a joint venture with ConFire to replace MOFD station 43 and ConFire station 16 - must be reached before he can continue. He said that by late this year or early next he plans to update the district standards of coverage, an operational plan defining levels of service.

"There are many competing interests for this money," said the chief. He noted the need for a competitive compensation package to hire and retain firefighters and for additional funds to beef up the fire prevention division, plus the demand for more ambulance coverage - in short, most of the things he could not do because of the recession. Those inactions ultimately helped the district stay afloat.

One of the competing interests staked claim to the fund surplus. "They asked us for a sacrifice based on projections, and now they see that the numbers were off," said Vince Wells, president, Local 1230 of the firefighters' union. "We'd like to see the firefighters paid comparably to other agencies. Maybe restore the salaries they took from us." MOFD firefighters agreed to a 3.5 percent pay cut in 2014, but have the opportunity to earn up to 16 percent more over the next three years. Wells advocated for not only a staffing bump to 19 but also an increase in the number of daily on-duty firefighters to 21. "If they have the money, they should staff another ambulance," he said. Orinda resident and MOFD watchdog Steve Cohn suggested that the district set specific goals for the use of the excess funds. "There is a lot of money on the table," he wrote in a letter to the board. "Hopefully you will not follow the path of the past 15 years and give it all to a few employees with no expanded service for the taxpayers."

"Service is what we should be all about," said Weil.

"I also have to be concerned about the district's sustainability," cautioned Healy, sounding not unlike Gov. Jerry Brown, who has preached fiscal restraint despite a surplus in the California state budget. "We are not in the business of hoarding the public's money," said the chief. "But we can't provide service if we're bankrupt."

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