



Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire District

Board of Directors
Wednesday, June 3, 7 p.m.
Moraga Library Community Room
1500 St. Mary's Road, Moraga
For meeting times and agendas,
visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors

Tuesday, June 16, 1:30 p.m.
Board Chamber room 107,
Administration Building,
651 Pine St., Martinez
For meeting times and agendas,
visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

Emergency response information
and training:
Lamorinda Community
Emergency Response Team (CERT)
www.lamorindacert.org

**Please submit
Letters and Opinions:**
[letters@lamorinda
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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 dis-

trict 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."

ConFire County Ambulance Proposal on the Table

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District and American Medical Response submitted its joint proposal May 21 to Contra Costa County Health Services to acquire the available county ambulance contract beginning in 2016. ConFire chose AMR, the current county am-

balance provider, as its partner in order to leverage their combined resources and experience in the emergency medical services industry. Contra Costa County Fire and EMS, together with AMR – known as the Alliance – submitted the only proposal to the county.

"I can't say we were surprised or not surprised," said Jesse Allured, county EMS program coordinator, of the sole submission. "We knew the response would be limited, based on what we saw at the bidders' conference." Besides ConFire and AMR, only two private ambulance companies attended that March conference.

Dale Feldhauser, chief operating officer of Paramedics Plus, a San Leandro EMS systems management organization, explained why his company did not bid on the contract. "The finances of the ambulance business have changed considerably," he said. "A partnership with a public entity is the only way to go now." Medi-

Cal, a government health coverage provider, reimburses pennies on the dollar for ambulance transport, and through the federal ground emergency medical transport program, a public ambulance provider receives additional money to offset the losses incurred as a result of the low payment. "The federal money does not fully reimburse the lost revenue caused by the low reimbursement, but it is better than what a private ambulance transport system can currently collect," said ConFire chief Jeff Carman.

Feldhauser said that his company did not respond to ConFire's earlier request seeking a private ambulance partner. "I thought AMR was best for that system, and I wish them the best of luck," he said. "I think AMR will make this work."

Gary Tennyson, chief executive officer of Falck Northern California, a division of one of the world's largest healthcare organizations and a bidders' conference attendee, did not re-

spond as to why his company did not submit a proposal to the county.

The document submitted by the Alliance lays out particulars of its experience, financial stability, available resources and commitment to the community. The 180-page presentation includes such minute details as how often ambulances will undergo an oil change (every 5,000 miles, page 114) and the size of the logos on the sides of the ambulances (4-inch letters, minimum, page 104).

Financial information was not publicized. "We don't want to have this information used for the wrong reasons, possibly by a competitor," said Allured. Citygate Associates LLC, a public sector consultant, will vet the financials to make sure that the proposed venture is realistic and sustainable.

"While we haven't won the bid yet, we are almost there," said Carman. The Board of Supervisors expects to award the contract this fall.

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Local Fire Services Prep for Wildland Fire Season

By Cathy Dausman



Local fire services personnel gathered as part of a multi-agency mutual response area drill. Photo Cathy Dausman

It might have seemed like a walk in the park for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and a host of other agencies participating in a series of recent multi-agency mutual response area drills in preparation for the 2015 wildland fire season. After all, it was daylight, temperatures were moderate, access was via paved public roads, manpower was rested and plentiful and, best of all, it was just a drill. But this was serious business, and it takes "a lot of resources to get the hose up there," Berkeley Fire Department

Captain Tim MacIsaac explained. "There" was a 3,000-foot hillside, with hoses laid out in 100-foot increments. Fire crews from Berkeley, Oakland, MOFD, Kensington, and East Bay Regional Parks were on hand the morning *Lamorinda Weekly* accompanied MOFD's Dennis Rein to the site.

MOFD sent a total of three different crews to each drill to battle an imaginary one-acre hillside grass fire along East Bay Regional Park's west slope adjacent to Orinda.

Firefighters sweated in low 50-degree temperatures as they attacked the "fire" in two teams clothed in full protective gear while toting 40-pound backpacks and hauling 100-foot lengths of hose and hand tools. Non-fire related hazards included working in an area known for the presence of poison oak, ticks and rattlesnakes.

One team approached from the south; a second climbed a parallel route to attack the fire from the north. No one climbed the line empty handed.

Rein shakes his head when he hears people reassure each other with "don't worry; it's just a grass fire." He knows the cost each agency bears when it has to spread remaining crews thin and make do without equipment used on the call. He knows when an incident commander calls for air support it comes in as two helicopters, two fixed-wing aircraft and a fifth plane flying air tactical supervision.

Support like that doesn't come cheap. It's never "just a grass fire."

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