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Orinda House Fire Response Questioned

By Nick Marnell



View of the Charles Hill Road fire from the captain's seat of a responding MOFD engine.
- Photo courtesy MOFD

A firefighter was injured and four family members were displaced in a two-alarm fire that broke out in a single-family home in Orinda June 21. The fire at 16 Charles Hill Road, which was reported shortly after 10 a.m., was contained within an hour; the injured firefighter was treated at the scene and returned to work, according to Dennis Rein, Moraga-Orinda Fire District public information officer for the incident. "It was a very aggressive fire attack by our guys, and they saved a large portion of the house," Fire Chief Stephen Healy told the MOFD board July 1. Battalion chief Sean Perkins estimated damage of \$200,000.

Some north Orinda residents questioned the fire response, as, based on data provided by Rein, engine 145 arrived at the scene seven and a half minutes from the time the fire was first called in, with engine 143 arriving nearly 30 seconds later. According to an Orinda resident, a driver saw smoke but no fire engine, so he drove up Charles

Hill to fire station 43 in hopes of alerting the firefighters. But the station was empty.

MOFD station 43, at 20 Via Las Cruces, less than one-half mile from the incident, was empty because the station 43 captain was meeting that morning with the captain at station 45 in Orinda Village. According to Healy, that type of meeting occurs routinely. In fact, the chief encourages face-to-face meetings among his crews, subject to a district directive that took effect July 1. "I want them to get out and learn their streets," he said.

From 10 a.m. until sunset, the crews can go anywhere for any reason, but only within their primary first-due response areas. The crews may leave their areas for what Healy termed an operational necessity.

"They must remain in the vicinity of their own station's primary coverage area to minimize any delays," said battalion chief Jerry Lee. "For example, the fire engine from the Rheem station in Moraga will not be allowed to venture out of the Rheem area during those hours."

District training sessions and meetings between crews, such as the one that took place the morning of June 21, must now be scheduled before 10 a.m.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District crews do not normally conduct in-person meetings outside their first-due areas, according to Lon Goetsch, assistant chief of operations. The district personnel often meet via teleconference, and some of the district training is conducted using web-based software. "But we do encourage them to drive through their first-due areas," he said.

Goetsch said that crews often run training exercises away from their stations. Two or three crews may run a structure fire drill at Saint Mary's College, or the Lafayette station 17 captain often will conduct drills in the rough terrain of the Hunsaker Canyon area. "In the summer, we train in the morning so we can keep them close to their stations in the afternoon," said Goetsch.

Healy told the MOFD board that, although the response time to the Charles Hill fire was at the upper limit of the district performance standard, it fell within what he cited as a national response time standard of nine and a half minutes for a suburban area.

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[back](#)

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