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## No Drought in EBMUD Employee Compensation

*By Nick Marnell*

The public's relationship with fire and water is stewarded in Lamorinda for the most part by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the East Bay Municipal Utility District. Each entity has recently struggled through adversity. The management of one agency responded to its crisis by cutting salaries, thereby sharing the burden with its customers, while the other agency placed the burden almost entirely on the backs of its customers and continued to increase total compensation for its employees.

The Great Recession battered MOFD, with property tax receipts - its major source of revenue - falling and not keeping up with expenses. Despite the district carrying a negative balance in its general fund and being warned by its auditor that it was running out of cash, then-president John Wyro famously told district residents in 2013, "There is no need to raise taxes." The district has kept that word to date.

Not only did MOFD decline to stick the public with a tax increase, management and labor both agreed to wage concessions to help the district weather its financial crisis. The firefighters received no raise from 2008 until 2015. In fact, their wages were cut a further 3.5 percent in 2014. Fire Chief Stephen Healy also took a 3.5 percent salary cut in 2014, and each of his battalion chiefs received the same pay reduction.

While MOFD experienced a property tax decrease, EBMUD experienced an inventory decrease. The state water shortage became so severe that Gov. Jerry Brown declared in 2015 that California was into the fourth year of a drought, ordering water customers to cut usage by 25 percent from 2013 levels. EBMUD reacted quickly to this threat to its revenue. But unlike MOFD, the district placed most of the burden of its potential revenue shortfall on its customers. EBMUD raised rates 8 percent to compensate for the water shortage - in effect, penalizing those who conserved - and hammered its customers with drought surcharges of up to 23 percent. The water district also slapped its customers with an excessive use penalty of \$2 for every unit consumed over an 80-unit threshold and released the names of excessive users when requested. "If needed, the penalty can get a lot tougher," said district spokeswoman Abby Figueroa at an Oct. 16 news conference. (The Lamorinda Weekly received the list of Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda excessive water users from EBMUD, but has declined to publish the names.)

Despite the onus placed upon its customers, not one member of the EBMUD senior management team has taken a cent less in total compensation since the beginning of the drought in 2012. For example, based on records supplied by the district, EBMUD general manager Alexander Coate's total compensation increased 19.8 percent between 2012 and 2014. And unlike the MOFD rank and file during their hard times, none of the EBMUD labor groups have taken a pay cut during the four years of drought conditions.

"Our salaries and benefit packages are fair and appropriate," said Coate. "This compensation effectively recruits staff with the skill level and expertise necessary to operate a Bay Area water and wastewater district of our size and scope. We are in a competitive job market and while we face ongoing drought and the challenges of aging infrastructure, we need to retain our staff and managers now more than ever."

Few will disagree that it is wise to protect and conserve natural resources. Keeping property maintained by controlling unruly vegetation helps the fire district protect natural resources, and limiting water usage during a drought helps EBMUD conserve that natural resource.

But the sacrifices of the conservation efforts have not always been shared equitably between the employees of public agencies and their customers.

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