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Despite Surplus, Moraga-Orinda Fire District Still Bugged Down By Budget Sticking Points

By Nick Marnell

Even as the Moraga-Orinda Fire District projected a general fund surplus of nearly \$250,000 for fiscal year 2016-17, Fire Chief Stephen Healy warned that the district still struggles with employee recruitment and retention, and the firefighters union complained about district income inequality. The district board approved a budget June 15 that included general fund revenue of \$20.4 million, a 4.6 percent increase over the prior year thanks in large part to a 6.3 percent increase in property tax revenue, with general fund expenses increasing 7 percent to \$20.2 million. Much of the expense increase was due to higher salaries and benefits, including retirement contribution costs and health insurance charges.

"Recruiting and training firefighters is very expensive," the chief told the board earlier. "We need to remain competitive in the regional job market." Healy noted that the improved economy in the Bay Area is adding pressure for public agencies to stay competitive, with agencies that offer the best pay and benefits pulling tenured employees away from other agencies.

"Our firefighters have never asked to be the highest paid in the area, but have only asked to keep pace," Healy said, pointing to an internal salary survey which found that the MOFD firefighters are paid more than 20 percent below the Bay Area average of comparable fire districts. "We must retain the high quality employees that we currently have," the chief said.

The firefighters union added its own take to the salary discussion by lashing out at the district board over the chief's 4.5 percent pay increase, which pushed his salary to \$229,000 effective July 1.

"If you go back 10 years ago to July 2006, the signed contract for the chief position included a base salary of \$173,000," Local 1230 representative Mark DeWeese told the board, noting that the 32 percent increase for the chief's salary far exceeded the 12.5 percent pay increase for the rank and file over the same period.

"Income inequality is a major national political issue and we have a similar problem here in our district," DeWeese said.

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[back](#)

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