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## Fire Districts

### Public Meetings

**Moraga-Orinda Fire District** Board of Directors  
Wednesday, July 6, 7 p.m.  
Go to website for meeting location  
For meeting times and agendas,  
visit [www.mofd.org](http://www.mofd.org)

**ConFire** Board of Directors  
Tuesday, July 19, 1:30 p.m.  
Board Chamber room 107,  
Administration Building,  
651 Pine St., Martinez  
For meeting times and agendas,  
visit  
<http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

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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.

## Tax Disparity in MOFD is Still a Hot Issue in Orinda

By Nick Marnell

Orindans frustrated with a perceived tax funding inequity perpetrated by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District made their case to the district board June 15, and for once the directors promised to fully investigate the residents' concerns.

MOFD is funded mainly through two distinct revenue sources: the ad valorem 1 percent tax on real property and the special district-assessed parcel tax, called the fire flow tax, roughly billed at six cents per square foot of a residence. For fiscal year 2016-17, MOFD projects property tax revenue of \$18.5 million and fire flow tax revenue of slightly more than \$1 million.

Though all residents of the district pay the 1 percent tax to Contra Costa County, the amount of the tax allocated to the fire district varies by municipality. Again roughly speaking, more than 22 cents out of the Orinda property tax dollar goes to MOFD,

while 19 cents per tax dollar is delivered to the district out of Moraga.

This uneven percentage distribution, which is based upon allocations determined under Proposition 13, is one aspect of the Orindans' perceived funding inequity. Another is assurance of the use of Orinda tax dollars only in Orinda, which some perceive as a promise made to Orindans before the 1997 merger of the Orinda Fire Protection District with the Moraga Fire Protection District. MOFD has operated as a consolidated district since 1999, with all services provided on an integrated basis, so somehow the script went sideways and the district veered off track, according to Orinda resident Steve Cohn.

"The framers of the merger from the Orinda side did make their intentions very clear with regards to the 22.8 percent of Orinda's ad valorem property taxes going to MOFD," Cohn said. He cited mate-

rial printed in the voters' pamphlet endorsing the measures for the creation of MOFD, which stated that one of the driving forces for the creation of the new district was to "insure that fire protection dollars Orindans pay will stay in Orinda."

But statements made in voter pamphlets are not binding whatsoever, said Dick Olsen, then-vice chair of the Moraga Fire Committee. "Whatever was presented is immaterial," he said. Comments in voter pamphlets are merely a form of free speech, and they carry no official weight.

Yes, a tax disparity existed at the time, said director Brad Barber of Orinda, but it apparently was not of interest to the district founders or to the voters, or nobody knew what to do about it.

"We never discussed property tax equity then. There were too many other things going on," said Gordon Nathan, one of the early MOFD directors.

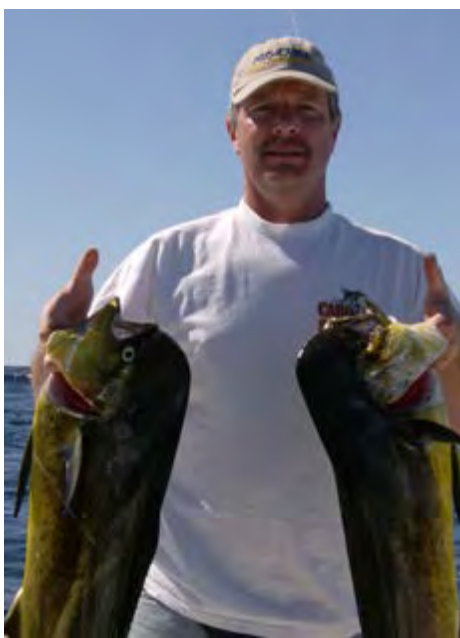
Solutions were in short supply, with Vince Maiorana of Orinda suggesting that MOFD raise the Moraga tax allocation rate to 22 percent, something the district has no authority to do. Moraga director Fred Weil, long critical of the Orinda complaints, again emphasized that what is relevant is not the revenue distribution but the service provided by the district.

Nevertheless, unlike abjectly dismissing the Orindans' concerns as they had in previous years, the directors agreed to continue the discussion of all aspects of district funding at a full board session, likely later this summer, with the intention of formalizing a policy decision on tax equity.

"Either it's equitable and here's why, or let's answer the question and do all the math, no matter how long it takes, until we resolve it," said Alex Evans, a director from Orinda.

## ConFire Chief: Reach Out, He'll Be There

... continued from page A1



The Chief off duty in Cabo Photo provided

A fire in a tank car holding 270,000 gallons of propane forced the evacuation of nearly 5,000 homes in the city of Lincoln. "A two-mile blast if it exploded, seven to eight thousand fatalities," Carman said. "It would have killed more people than any incident I've been in." How to keep the rail car cool enough so it wouldn't blow up, with temperatures rising to 1,000 degrees, was the challenge. "If it hit 1,200 we knew it would explode. It was the toughest decision I ever made: should we just let this thing blow, or deal with it? The group agreed — we had no choice. We had to go in. We sent firefighters into the blast zone for 36 hours, pumping 5,500 gallons of water a minute, until the car ran out of fuel."

That was the decisive leadership ConFire desperately sought, and Carman quickly got his chance to exhibit that leadership.

### Jumping Right In

A consultant told the fire board that the struggling district should take two engines out of service in select companies and re-

place them with three, two-person squads, since more than two-thirds of the district calls were medical related. "But what about the third that are fire responses?" said Carman, who fought the proposal and secured agreement from his directors. "The board gave me the latitude to do what I saw was right, and it has paid off."

"He was open and transparent with us serving on the fire board, and also with our employees and labor groups," ConFire board chair Candace Andersen said.

The chief took off from there. The district hadn't hired firefighters in five years. Mandatory overtime racked the staff, which was down 40 positions. "We had an internal clash with human resources. They weren't working fast enough. We started meeting and broke down the barriers," Carman said. The district filled three fire academies in 18 months and today is nearly fully staffed.

"We didn't get along with the sheriff's department," the chief said. Again he reached out. "My first day on the job I had a meeting at the sheriff's office," said assistant chief of operations Lon Goetsch. "We talked about partnering to use their helicopter for fire rescue in addition to law enforcement." The departments struck a deal, and ConFire now has a dedicated budget for an aerial rescue program. The helicopter crew recently helped ConFire rescue a collapsed hiker in the Lafayette hills.

### Building Morale

After the parcel tax defeat, the rank and file felt betrayed by the public, and they did not trust the fire and county leadership. "Carman built morale. He visited every station, consistently, a couple a week. He asked for feedback," said Vince Wells, president of International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1230. "In our contract negotiations, during conflict with the negotiating team, instead of the usual standard of the chief

staying out of it, he spoke up and advocated for us to get a deal done."

The city of Lafayette, bitter over the closure of fire station 16 at the western end of the city, threatened to detach from the district. Carman held things together by meeting with city officials and task force members and updating them on ConFire's progress. "I had to show the public that we're worth what they're paying for. The firefighters do some incredible work, and they just go back to their stations and don't talk about it. On the one hand, I admire that. But, you've got to let people know what you're doing." In May, the ConFire board approved a total rebuild of station 16.

Carman's legacy with ConFire will likely be tied to his integration of nearly the entire county emergency ambulance transport system into the fire district. A non-traditional revenue source, yes, for a district that sorely needs revenue; but by absorbing the ambulance system into ConFire, where he can control dispatch, Carman saved the duplication of an engine and a private ambulance response, easing wear and tear on the engines and keeping them available for fire emergencies. It was a first-of-its-kind amalgamation in recent California history.

"Carman always gave me a heads-up before a controversial subject, like, starting the ambulance business," Wells said. "He wanted our buy-in before he even approached the board." Added Goetsch, "He used his industry contacts and pulled all of that expertise together. He reached out to fire chiefs throughout the county, then to his boss and then the board."

The chief said his ambulance deal is his favorite. "We were able to take the money that was going to the private company and use it to enhance our local medical system."

### Working with MOFD

Even a deal that fell through did not stain Carman's image: the fire station 46

joint venture between ConFire and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. Carman inherited the project, an attempt to save each fire district \$1 million annually in operating costs by consolidating two stations at the Orinda-Lafayette border.

"The 46 project was a little frustrating," Carman said. "It looks so good to the public, like it's so easy to do, but it involved two drastically different agencies and putting them under the same roof. I never think anything is impossible, but that was going to be problematic."

MOFD chief Stephen Healy praised Carman's efforts through the tedious, time-consuming negotiation process. "He was always very respectful toward our organization, which I really appreciated," Healy said. "We're still friends and have since worked together on a number of other projects."

### A County Leader

Bankruptcy is no longer mentioned. Neighboring agencies have reached out to ConFire, for help with everything from additional mutual aid to station construction. Impenetrable walls barely exist between ConFire and other county departments. Tax revenue increased, and after years of zero spending on capital projects, the district unveiled a 5-year, \$36 million capital improvement plan. "I've never worked harder than I am now," Goetsch said. "We've revitalized our organization."

"I am enjoying my job every day," Carman said. "It has its challenges but we seem to be solving them and that is satisfying. I appreciate the support we get from the community."

Lafayette fire commissioner Bill Granados summarized maybe best of all the respect the chief has garnered.

"Every decision the guy has made has been the right one," he said.