



**Fire Districts**

**Public Meetings**

**Moraga-Orinda Fire District** Board of Directors  
 Wednesday, Aug. 16, 7 p.m.  
 Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit [www.mofd.org](http://www.mofd.org)

**ConFire** Board of Directors  
 Tuesday, Aug. 8, 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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**Morale plummeting at MOFD due to board actions**

By Nick Marnell



Capt. Mark McCullah shares his frustrations with MOFD board.

Intent on putting the district on the road to financial viability, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board voted to slash district operations, with one director telling a room full of firefighters that everything was in play for future cuts, including the closure of a fire station.

Fire Chief Stephen Healy presented a revised 2017-18 MOFD budget to the board July 18 that eliminated \$500,000 in operational expenses, including overtime, but even those cuts did not totally satisfy Director John Jex.

“Our general reserve is grossly

inadequate, and will be at the end of this year, even with this,” Jex said, stressing that MOFD is not in good enough financial shape to operate long term and to meet its obligations. With the budget changes, the district projects its general fund reserve to reach \$4.8 million this fiscal year, though as of 2016 MOFD recognizes more than \$64 million in net pension liability, a pension obligation bond and retiree health care liability.

“You need to increase revenue, or make operational changes like eliminating a fire house,” Jex said.

“You have to make those kinds of determinations.”

Director Steve Anderson pleaded for the board to keep the district on track with its mission to provide the highest possible level of emergency and public service to the community. “In the last 60 days, we are at the lowest morale that I have seen in this organization. These people have lost their leader and they have no confidence in their board,” Anderson said, referring to Healy’s announced September departure and urging passage of the original budget. “There is a toxic environment going on here, and we’ve got to fix the morale now.”

Three directors remained unmoved, as Jex, Craig Jorgens and Brad Barber voted to pass the revised budget, with \$100,000 added back for the chief to use for contingencies. Anderson and board President Kathleen Famulener voted against the cuts.

Firefighter-paramedic Lucas Lambert, district union representative, lashed out at the board’s decision to reduce operating expenses. “The MOFD board of directors has

created an unnecessarily chaotic environment at our meetings. This type of chaos is not conducive to the high level of service that we aim to provide and the professional environment we pride ourselves on,” Lambert said, urging the public to pay close attention and not stand for service cuts in the community.

Local 1230 President Vince Wells said he understands the need for MOFD to be financially responsible, especially with the district history of financial mismanagement, but he said there needs to be a proper balance between financial restraint and providing adequate service. “A couple of new board members have financial backgrounds, and are putting financial stability ahead of fire service, and that has the troops concerned,” Wells said.

Wells also talked about the soon-to-begin 2018 labor negotiations. “I’m concerned,” Wells said. “Because of the actions this board has taken so far, we expect it will push for reduced resources. With this group, it seems everything is on the table, and that makes everyone uneasy.”



Courtesy: Moraga PD

**House fire in Moraga**

Moraga-Orinda Fire District firefighters put out an early morning, single-alarm blaze at a residence on Corte Amigos in Moraga July 14. The fire was contained to two rooms and extinguished in 15 minutes.

“The homeowners were asleep and thanks to their smoke detector, everyone got out safely,” Fire Chief Stephen Healy said.

The fire was less than a mile away from the June 19 vegetation fire along the hillside above Campolindo High School. “That fire was an accident, likely caused by human activity related to work on the high-tension wires, through the fire is still under investigation,” Healy said. — Nick Marnell

**Lafayette hills remains IDd; longtime mystery solved**

By Cathy Dausman

Skeletal remains discovered on a Lamorinda hillside March 16 have been identified by the California Department of Justice DNA Laboratory in Richmond, accord-

ing to Moraga Police. Forensic analysis identified the deceased as Richard Allen Saimons, reported missing to Lafayette Police on Aug. 2, 1998.

Saimons, a Lafayette resident, left his home that afternoon and never returned. Saimons was 37 at the time of his disappearance. There were no signs of foul play.

Anyone with information about this case is asked to contact Moraga Police Lt. Brian South at (925) 888-7052 or the Lafayette Police at (925) 284-5010.

**Total Devastation**

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The morning after.

Photo Nick Marnell

“I’ve never been close to a wildfire or any kind of serious fire before, but I’ll tell you the sound it made was mind-boggling. It sounded like a jet taking off, or a tornado. I’ve never seen or heard anything quite like it before,” Lafayette resident Mark Robinson said.

By the time Capt. Jared Palant and his ConFire engine company arrived at the scene near midnight, the building at 100 Lafayette Circle was completely engulfed in flames.

“We knew instantly this was huge by the number of 911 calls we got,” Marshall said. “Unless we had been there 30 minutes earlier, there was no way we were saving that building.”

Palant immediately called for a third alarm. “A wood-sided building, with a shake roof, surrounded by two-story apartment buildings and another two-story commercial

building, a eucalyptus tree — our goal was to contain the fire to the building of origin,” he said. “We had to prevent large chunks of ash from landing on the roofs of the neighboring buildings.”

Crews pumped water out of five hydrants to fight the fire, requiring thousands of gallons of extra water from the East Bay Municipal Utility District; a typical fire would need one hydrant. “It was the biggest fire I’ve ever seen as the captain of a first-responding unit,” said Palant, an eight-year ConFire veteran.

“I was afraid the whole town would go,” Marilyn Finn, a 101 Lafayette Circle resident, said. “It’s a miracle that they held it to that one building.”

Nearly 50 firefighters contained the blaze within two hours, and several fire personnel remained on the scene throughout the day. The

fire caused an estimated \$1.1 million in damage with no reported injuries. Stunned tenants and residents caught their first glimpse of the devastation Thursday morning, the historic building constructed in the 1970s burnt to the ground.

Assadi heard the news at 6:30 a.m. “I’m in shock,” he said. “I just don’t understand. How could a fire spread that quickly?” Assadi said he wants to reopen La Finestra as soon as possible, and he is searching for a suitable location in the city.

He praised, and expressed pain for, his employees, particularly server Tony Lavino, whom he called a local icon. “I want to have my people back,” a crushed Assadi said.

“All of our work was saved in the cloud,” said Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jay Lifson, scrambling to help displaced

tenants find new locations. He landed a temporary home for the Chamber at Stanley Middle School and an additional meeting location at the Stanley Smith Insurance agency.

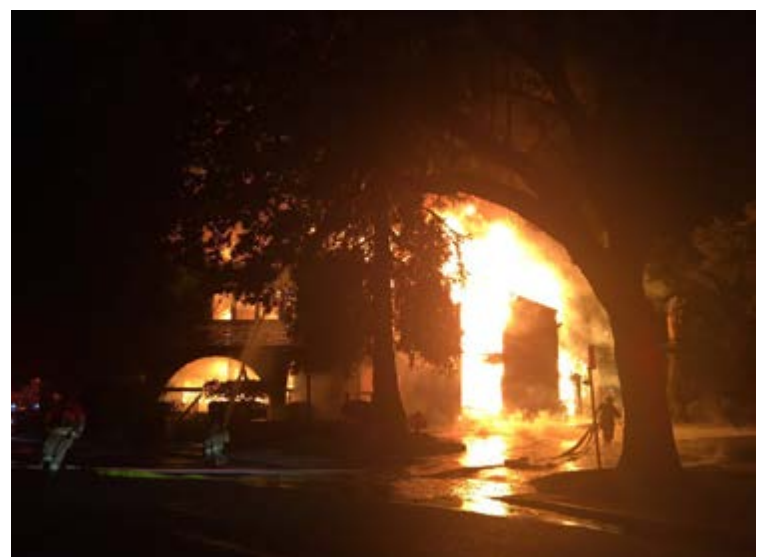
Marta Chavalas of Skincare by Marta said finding a new location has been difficult because of the tight real estate market. “I would like to stay in Lafayette, if possible,” she said.

One business owner at 110 Lafayette Circle, unaffected directly by the incident, was moved by the response of Lafayette residents. Heidi Simarro of Phoenix Skincare and Waxing said that nothing was even singed at her building, and other than parking problems because of the newly fenced-off area, she was doing OK. “Competitors called and offered me space,” she said. “I almost cried when I heard that.”

Lifson plans a meeting with the displaced tenants to go over his attempts to secure government loans and Workforce Development assistance from Contra Costa County.

According to Lafayette Chief of Police Eric Christensen, the property has been released to its insurance company which will conduct its own investigation. After the investigation the property manager, Wells and Bennett of Walnut Creek, will handle removal of the debris. Christensen estimated the process will take several months.

Lafayette City Manager Steve Falk said he will set up a meeting with Lafayette Circle property owners to discuss reasonable and appropriate land use opportunities in the area, an area to be long remembered as the site of one of the city’s most spectacular structure fires.



The Lafayette Chamber offices and other businesses in flames. ConFire