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Public expects next MOFD chief to thoroughly grasp the numbers

By Nick Marnell

Above all else, the fire chief of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District must have a handle on finances, district residents told the board at a Sept. 27 community workshop designed to gather input on what qualities and experience the public wants in its new chief.

Financial problems have dominated district headlines for eight years, beginning with the fallout from an incorrect pension the board approved for a retiring fire chief that the district pension manager later reduced by \$1 million. The district misapplied \$2 million earmarked to pay down its pension obligation bond and its auditor incorrectly recorded a \$23 million prepaid item in its 2015 and 2016 financial reports. Since 2016 the board includes a majority of directors with private industry financial experience.

Dozens filled the Moraga Library conference room for the MOFD workshop, even with attendance likely suppressed by a high-profile Moraga Town Council meeting. Interim Fire Chief Jerry Lee and his board received plenty of advice from passionate district residents.

"We need somebody with the background to be able to manage the underfunded employee pension plan," said Orinda resident Kathy Finch, referring to the more than \$60 million in net pension and retiree health care liabilities carried by the district. Other Orinda residents talked about the tax allocation discrepancy between the two major district municipalities. "The new chief must take care of Orinda," said Janet Maiorana.

Former MOFD director and Moraga resident Dick Olsen said it was essential that any required financial sacrifices be equitably shared while maintaining services and fairly compensating employees. Olsen also recommended that the new chief live within 10 miles of the heart of the district in order to respond timely to emergencies.

"It is important that the chief you hire have the prospect of remaining for at least five years," said former director John Wyro, noting that without longevity it will be difficult for the chief to maintain credibility within the community. Superlative political skills to deal with the board and the district factions were a fire chief must, added Canyon resident Jonathan Goodwin.

With a reminder that the job is more than just financially driven, Vince Wells, president of Local 1230 of the firefighters union, advised the board to be sure to hire a chief with a thorough knowledge of fire operations. "We put our lives on the line for that person," Wells said.

Lee said he is considering applying for the permanent job but is weighing personal and family considerations. "I have not made my final decision," Lee said.

The district has retained Roseville-based Bob Murray and Associates to conduct the search for the new fire chief.

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