



Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire District

Board of Directors
Wednesday, Nov. 15, 7 p.m.
Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors

Tuesday, Dec. 12, 1:30 p.m.
Board Chamber room 107,
Administration Building,
651 Pine St., Martinez
For meeting times and agendas,
visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

Please...



House destroyed, one dead in Archer Circle fire

By Nick Marnell



Archer fire contained

Shortly before dawn on Oct. 30, Ferenc Kovac heard pops and sparks, looked out his window and saw smoke and flames shooting from a house afire in a nearby Moraga cul de sac. Kovac called in the alarm at 4:48 a.m. and within six minutes, Capt. Mike Rattary and

his engine company from Moraga-Orinda Fire District Station 41 arrived at 9 Archer Circle to a house fully engulfed in flames.

Battalion Chief Felipe Baretto immediately called for a second alarm because of the potential for the fire spreading into the adjacent

Photo courtesy Felipe Baretto, MOFD trees and uphill to neighboring homes. A total of 41 firefighters from MOFD and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District responded to the incident. Because drums possibly containing nitric and hydrochloric acid were reported in the garage, the Contra Costa

County Hazardous Materials Team was called to the scene. Wires were reported down and PG&E secured the electrical and gas lines.

"I was impressed that they could contain the fire to the one structure," Kovac said.

One resident was rescued from the rear of the structure and transported to John Muir Hospital. The victim later died due to the severe burn injuries he received in the fire, according to Interim Fire Chief Jerry Lee. Another resident escaped unharmed.

Total property damage was estimated at \$1 million. The fire remains under joint investigation by officials of MOFD and the Moraga Police Department, who have yet to announce the cause of the fire.

The Alford family evacuated their nearby home because of the Archer Circle fire danger. In 2016, the Alford family evacuated their country club home on Augusta Drive after it was red-tagged as uninhabitable because of landslides along a regional park trail.

"This time, it was only for 30 minutes," Ray Alford said.

Local firefighters reflect on recent major disasters

... continued from page A1

The 80-person task force, whose members must meet rescue certifications and must be able to depart on three hours notice, was deployed in San Antonio, Katy, Simonton and Wharton, Texas. The responders stayed in makeshift dorms at school gyms and stadiums.

"The response from the citizens when we got there left the biggest impression on me," said Capt. David Watson of ConFire. "They were more concerned for us than they were for themselves. And these were people who lost everything."

"Texans brought out home-cooked meals," Rogness said. "A family came to our truck stop with a full Texas barbecue - for 70 of us."

The work in Texas included repairing rain damage and performing rescue operations. Wharton experienced severe flooding, and the task force searched for and evacuated residents and animals from the flooded areas. Rescue officer David Mazaika, a veteran MOFD engineer who orchestrated the district's original participation in the task force, discovered something in Wharton that he had not expected.

"What I learned is that you're not only there to handle the big issues. It's the little things that people appreciate the most. The local fire chief in Wharton was so appreciative that guys from halfway across the country came to his small town.



Task force workers crash inside high school gymnasium at Key Largo, Florida.

Photos courtesy MOPFA and California Task Force 4

The people were shocked and amazed," Mazaika said.

U-turn to Florida

After the completion of the Texas deployment, Rogness sensed what was on deck. "I saw the writing on the wall. Irma was coming. Guys who were driving home made it to El Paso, and had to turn around, to Atlanta. Then to Florida," Rogness said.

"Ten days in Texas, home for 30 hours, 12 days back to Florida. With a baby daughter just born July 5," Mazaika said.

The task force arrived in Florida before the Sept. 10 hurricane,

with the opportunity to work on preparation unlike the catch-up it performed after 40 inches of rain in Texas. Most of the damage was from wind and surge and the group did most of its work between Marathon and Key West. Again, the resiliency of the local communities stunned the task force.

"This guy had a mobile food company in the Keys, he came by and cooked lunch for all of us," Mazaika said. "Not until afterward did we find out that he had lost his home, his clothes, everything. He only had his truck and trailer left. We took up a collection to try to get him going again. He broke down and cried."

The work in Florida was tougher because the Keys were so isolated from the mainland, with most residents having evacuated. Responders had to pick up their own food, their own water, their own fuel. Watson noted that the time in Texas was easier on his family, because in Florida, there was no cell service, no Wi-Fi, no way to communicate back home.

"I was energized, watching people who had never met each other working together to get the job done," Rogness said. "It's so cool for a small fire department like ours to be able to contribute to something this massive."

The North Bay

MOFD Capt. Mike Lacy had never been to Santa Rosa until his strike team arrived after the Oct. 8 North Bay wildfires. "I thought, this seems like a lot of houses that are burning really fast. When I got there, it only compounded my confusion," Lacy said. "Houses aren't

supposed to burn like this. Not 5,000 stucco-sided homes with tile roofs. I wouldn't have even batted an eye at that. I would have said, your house is safe."

ConFire sent two wildland units on an initial attack the day of the fire, along with four engines, as part of a strike team. "A total of 24 of our personnel responded to this incident," said ConFire Operations Chief Ed Gonzales.

Recognizing the amount of destruction and the speed with which it occurred was horrific to Lacy and the strike team. "It's a miracle that none of us got hurt," Lacy said, yet again overwhelmed by the gratefulness of people who had lost so much.

Lacy himself experienced a personal loss. "One of my friends lost his house. I met him when I was 4, while he was dating my mother. He was the reason I joined the fire service," Lacy said.

His biggest takeaway was that you do not have to live in the hills and forests to confront a disaster like the North Bay wildfires. "Where there are homes and major vegetation, this type of fire can hit," Lacy said, a not-so-veiled reference to Lamorinda.

The rush of disaster response is exciting, but responders agree that it's nice to return home. Not only are the responders heroes to the people whose lives have been turned upside down, they are heroes at home as well.

"Being away takes its toll," Watson said. "But when I saw my daughter running up to me when I landed at the Oakland Airport, it was a moment I will never forget."

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