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MOFD widens pool for chief officer candidates

By Nick Marnell

In order to increase the number of candidates to fill expected vacancies, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District has temporarily lowered academic requirements for its battalion chiefs. The district's requirement that only those with an associate degree or higher may apply for or hold a battalion chief position was waived by the board at its Feb. 7 meeting.

Fire Chief Dave Winnacker said that in 2016, the district held a battalion chief exam with two internal candidates, but both failed the test. As a result, the district has no internal candidates on its current battalion chief list, and the chief would have to fill vacancies from outside the district. The one-time educational requirement adjustment he presented for 2018 would open up the chief officer positions to more internal candidates.

Approval of the proposal was not a slam dunk for Winnacker.

"I'm horrified by this," said director Kathleen Famulener, who suggested that MOFD go outside to find qualified chief officer candidates if none reside in the district. "But I think they do. We're not pushing the people who could be battalion chiefs," Famulener said.

Local 1230 President Vince Wells supported the chief's proposal. "It's difficult to seek additional education once you become a firefighter," Wells said. "Often, those who have the qualifications to do the job lose out because they don't have the minimum academic qualifications."

Winnacker added that it was not realistic for an internal candidate who does not have an associate degree to get one by the time the district holds its battalion chief test in May.

"Anything we can do to tap into the internal pool is beneficial," the chief said. "The bottom line is the experience. We feel that experience outweighs having an AA degree."

Wells said that across the districts that he represents, some require only experience as a captain, and no associate degree, in order to qualify for promotion to battalion chief. According to its February internal promotional announcement, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District requires, among other qualifications, three years of experience as a ConFire captain and a high school diploma, G.E.D. equivalency or a high school proficiency certificate for eligibility to become a battalion chief.

The union, the Moraga-Orinda Fire Chief Officers Association and the board - including Famulener - agreed to the revised MOFD academic requirements for the 2018 examination process only. Other requirements, including two years experience as a captain, remain unchanged.

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