



Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors
 Wednesday, May 2, 7 p.m.
 Wednesday, May 16, 7 p.m.
 Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors
 Tuesday, May 22, 1:30 p.m.
 Board Chamber room 107, Administration Building, 651 Pine St., Martinez
 For meeting times and agendas, visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

MOFD board splits over proposed Moraga stormwater fee measure

By Nick Marnell

Despite pleas from Moraga stormwater fee measure proponents, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District declined to return a ballot on the stormwater fee proposed for its two town parcels, the board unable to justify using Orinda tax dollars to fund a Moraga capital expenditure.

Moraga Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg and Council Member Kymberleigh Korpus provided the board background for the proposed fee: The Moraga storm drain system is aging and requires \$29 million in repairs which the town is unable to squeeze out of its \$8.6 million operating budget; the fee would bring in \$800,000 a year, with no sunset, and would cover capital improvements, maintenance and operation of the system; and only Moraga property owners would be charged. Dick Olsen, speaking as a representative of the Moraga Save Our Storm Drains Committee, told the board that the fee was insurance against future

sinkholes, and would have a positive impact on district emergency response times.

No one disputed that the work needed done, but the board divided mainly on the philosophical issue of fair taxation.

Orinda Director Craig Jorgens said that Orinda fixed its storm drain infrastructure by issuing a bond, which owners of taxable city property pay for. (MOFD, which owns three fire stations in Orinda, is exempt from paying property tax.) “We shouldn’t be paying taxes to one entity that we don’t to a different one for exactly the same purpose,” said Jorgens, who bristled at the use of the word fee. “It’s semantics,” he said.

“The city has known about this a long time, but has failed to develop adequate reserves,” said Moraga Director John Jex of the town’s prior actions.

“Yes, the town should have saved money for this, but they didn’t,” said Moraga Director

Kathleen Famulener. “We need to do something.” Director Steve Anderson, who resides in Orinda but whose division comprises portions of both municipalities, called the proposed \$2,540 annual fee on the two Moraga district parcels cheap insurance, which would allow MOFD to better fulfill its mission of saving lives and property.

But it came down to what the board termed a taxation issue. “They didn’t want people who don’t live there to affect the outcome – they only wanted property owners to do it,” Jorgens said of the town’s strategy of having only Moraga property owners vote on the proposed fee. “In reality, you’re asking people who live in Orinda to vote for something for Moraga.”

That was the crux of the stance by President Brad Barber, who agreed that it is in the interest of MOFD that roads and infrastructure remain in excellent condition.

“But I feel awkward voting to increase taxes in a jurisdiction that I do not reside in,” said Barber, an Orinda resident.

Barber chose to abstain from every possible vote on the stormwater ballot: yes, no or abstain. The resultant perpetual deadlock of Jorgens and Jex voting no, and Anderson and Famulener voting yes, left the district no alternative.

“In the absence of direction from the board, we will not turn in a ballot,” said Fire Chief Dave Winnacker at the conclusion of the April 18 meeting.

“It is unfortunate that there was a split vote at the MOFD meeting on the town’s proposed stormwater fee measure,” said Battenberg, who added that the town will provide the district further information on how the storm drain infrastructure supports emergency response. She said she understood the challenge for the multijurisdictional district to consider a fee that would apply to only Moraga.

Democratic Party of Contra Costa County honors Local 1230 president

By Nick Marnell



Vince Wells, center, surrounded by firefighters as he receives the Robert Reich Award. Photo provided

Vince Wells, president of Local 1230 of the firefighters union, received the inaugural Robert Reich Award from the Democratic Party of Contra Costa County at the 2018 Franklin D. and Eleanor

Roosevelt President’s Award Dinner April 21 in Concord.

The Robert Reich Award, named after the former U.S. Secretary of Labor during the Clinton administration, recognizes an indi-

vidual “who is a tireless advocate for union labor and strengthens the partnership with the Democratic Party,” according to party chair Maria Alegria.

“I am honored to receive this award and to represent the members of a well respected profession,” Wells said. “I have been the union president for the last 10 years and it has allowed me to build relationships throughout the county and state. These relationships have helped me help our members as we fight for adequate staffing as well as pay and benefits.”

Wells, a Contra Costa County Fire Protection District captain, has had to walk a fine leadership line throughout his representation of firefighters from both Lamorinda fire agencies. During the economic downturn after the Great Recession, Wells struggled with seven ConFire station closures and the

precarious financial situation of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. By agreeing to defer wage increases for the rank and file, Wells attempted to not only maintain a high level of service to the community but also help the agencies stay afloat.

The party also recognized Wells’ support of political campaigns, ballot measures and other legislative initiatives that impact working families across the state of California.

Reich, Professor of Public Policy at UC Berkeley, congratulated Wells on receiving the eponymous award. “May we all be inspired by his work and leadership and continue striving to fulfill the vision of our nation – as one that allows for the achievement of the American Dream – no matter your background or history,” Reich wrote in a letter to the party.

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Here come the goats!

Last year the goats cleared 65 acres of the 144-acre open space in the Downs. “The goats get at what weed whackers can’t,” Leonard said. “They eat all the way down to the soil so you don’t have any erosion.”

Andree Soares, president of Star Creek Land Stewards, said that 450 goats will truck into Orinda on gooseneck trailers between May 8-10, depending on the weather. The first herd will stay for two weeks, then will be relieved by a new herd to finish the job. The project will last three weeks.

Soares explained that each goat removes nearly 5 pounds of organic dry matter per day, totaling over 45,000 pounds – more than 22 tons – of vegetation during the 21-day assignment. The goats will also excrete and deposit natural fertilizers and work them into the soil with their hooves.

The goats eat the majority of the time, sleeping as a group at night within their enclosures. An on-site herder, living in a trailer for the duration of the grazing project, mobilizes the animals to target the most high-risk areas identified within the Downs. A livestock protection dog lives with the goats and provides safekeeping from predators.

“Ultimately, these combined efforts improve soil health which increases its ability to absorb and retain precipitation and reduce erosive risks. It is really a win-win natural cycle on our landscapes,” Soares said.

The scene at the grazing site last year brought visitors to the Downs for an unexpected reason: to view the action. Families stopped to look at, and listen to, the incessant chomp-chomp-chomp of the goats, and even learn a thing or two about

focused job performance.

“MOFD is pleased to continue our partnership with engaged homeowners associations and the Diablo Fire Safe Council to encourage proactive fuels reduction projects,” said Fire Chief Dave Winnacker. “The return of goats to graze the hills of the Orinda Downs is emblematic of the strength of these relationships and the community’s commitment to creating a safer environment.”

The Orinda Downs project is part of Winnacker’s outreach to

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pull together various public agencies and neighborhoods to protect the district from wildfire threat. The chief has coordinated the district fire prevention efforts of PG&E, the East Bay Municipal Utility District and Cal Fire, and he encourages interested neighborhood associations to contact Leonard for fire prevention information.

For those who follow the chief’s advice, the goats may soon become part of an annual tradition in their own Lamorinda neighborhoods.

MOFD Open House on May 5

Before the arrival of the goats, another harbinger of spring occurs in Lamorinda - the May 5 Moraga-Orinda Fire District Spring Open House. The event takes place from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. at Fire Station 45 at 33 Orinda Way in Orinda.

The theme of the open house is wildfire preparedness, and the district goal is to educate the public to prepare families and properties well in advance of a wildland fire, increase awareness of wildfire season, and encourage residents to develop and implement a family disaster plan. Open house attendees can learn how to administer CPR, tour fire apparatus, meet Smoky Bear and Sparky the Fire Dog and have lunch with the firefighters. The Moraga-Orinda Professional Firefighters Association donates all proceeds from the hot dog lunch to the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation. The district holds a similar event in Moraga during October Fire Prevention Week.



Work begins at MOFD Fire Station 43.

Photo courtesy MOFD

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