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Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors
Wednesday, July 18, 7 p.m.
Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors
Tuesday, July 10, 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 projects a strong fiscal year ahead

By Nick Marnell

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District board approved the 2018-19 district budget at its June 20 meeting, and continuing along the same healthy financial track as many Lamorinda public agencies, MOFD projects a general fund balance of \$5.9 million, the highest number in its history. The projected general fund balance of 24 percent of 2018-19 general fund revenue exceeds the 17 percent board policy, though the district goal is to achieve a 50 percent reserve.

The most controversial budget

item was the funding of the district retiree health care and pension stabilization trusts. The district set up the two trust funds in order to mitigate the fluctuations of payments demanded by its pension fund manager, the Contra Costa County Employees Retirement Association.

In 2018, each trust was funded at \$374,000. For 2019, the board recommended a funding increase in the retiree health care trust to \$440,000 and in the pension stabilization fund to \$1.1 million. The strategy was vilified by the

firefighters and Director Kathleen Famulener, who questioned the timing of the increased expenditure with labor negotiations ongoing. The district contract with its firefighters expires on June 30.

Fire Chief Dave Winnacker stressed at the meeting that the \$1.5 million, though budgeted, will not be immediately transferred into the trust funds. "This projection is tentative," the chief said. "The actual amount of the transfer will be determined by a later board action, and the transfer of funds may only

occur after the board makes that determination."

The basic numbers read this way: general fund revenue up 8.7 percent to \$24.6 million, primarily due to a 6.1 percent projected increase in property tax revenue. General fund expenses are projected to rise 7 percent to \$23.4 million.

The district also expects to complete the construction of Fire Station 43 in north Orinda in the next fiscal year.

Nearly 200 fire code violations uncovered at Lamorinda schools

By Nick Marnell



Photo Nick Marnell

During the most recent fire inspections of Lamorinda public and private schools, fire officials discovered dozens of code violations that ranged from undocumented fire alarm testing and blocked exits to faulty wiring and improper storage of hazardous materials.

State law requires that the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District inspect all K-12 schools, public and private, in their districts once a year. MOFD schedules its inspections starting the last week of July, so the latest information on the 23 Moraga and Orinda schools is from 2017. ConFire completed inspections of the 11 Lafayette schools in mid-June. Fire officials sent their latest inspection reports for this newspaper to review.

Most of the Lamorinda schools

were built long ago, with not enough electrical outlets to handle life in the 21st century. Electrical issues ran high on the list of violations. Examples from the inspection reports included "Remove refrigerator from power strip" and "Remove extension cord and replace with permanent wall outlet."

Excessive storage in exit corridors, and around electrical outlets, did not please the inspectors: "Remove storage in front of electrical panels in electrical room near elevator equipment room on the east side of campus." Signage problems were pointed out at a number of the schools: "Repair exit sign rear west entrance of multipurpose room." Heaven help if an active shooter sprouts up on campus, and kids' egress is impeded by storage material or broken exit signs.

Fire inspectors see many things that the lay person will miss, like

violations of improperly marked flame retardant furniture or wall coverings. Often curtains do meet the flame retardant requirement, but if they do not carry a label, the inspector will write up a violation.

Even shoddy housekeeping made the violations list: "Clean dryer vent monthly or more often depending on amount of use," "Computer lab - clean around extinguisher" and "Foyer emergency light non-operable." One school was advised to "Remove bean bags in Room 8."

A hazardous materials violation was reported at Orinda Intermediate School, which had 20 total code violations, the highest number in the fire district. "Storing incompatible materials together, like an oxidizer with gasoline, can result in a violation," said Kathy Leonard, MOFD fire marshal.

Since schools have fire sprinklers, the level of fire safety is very high, said Robert Marshall, ConFire fire marshal. But the schools need to have the sprinkler system looked at and provide documentation of the system maintenance and testing. Same with fire alarms and hydrants. It's great to have them in the schools, but they must be maintained. "Provide annual fire alarm test/inspection documentation" was a

common violation uncovered.

For follow-up on simple fixes, MOFD allows the schools one week. If the repairs will take two weeks, the schools need to communicate with the fire district, whose schools recorded 131 fire code violations. "We grind down hard on them. We want this work done when the kids get back to school," Leonard said. ConFire, which reported 68 violations in Lafayette, gives the schools 30 days to get into compliance.

Springhill Elementary led the way among Lafayette schools with 39 violations. "The public has my absolute assurance that we will fix these problems and do it correctly," said Lafayette School District Superintendent Rachel Zinn. "And we will do it as soon as possible."

There was no argument from school officials about the requirement that their schools strictly comply with the fire inspectors' recommendations. "Regular fire inspections are part of a comprehensive safety plan to ensure school safety for students and staff," said Bruce Burns, superintendent of the Moraga School District. "We are grateful for the professionally conducted inspections, insights, recommendations, time to address corrections and timely follow-up."

Cities vie with state of California over control of BART lands

By Sora O'Doherty

The League of California Cities has recently taken a stand in opposition to Assembly Bill 2923, that would allow Bay Area Rapid Transit to construct housing on any land it owns within a half mile of a BART station free from local control. The bill was introduced by Assembly members David Chiu of the 17th District (mainly San Francisco) and Timothy Grayson of the 14th District (including Pleasant Hill, Concord and Martinez) and is scheduled for committee hearings in June.

Lafayette Mayor Don Tatzin sent a Transit-Oriented Development Notice of Opposition to Chiu stating that the city of Lafayette must oppose the bill as it gives BART land use authority over BART owned property within a half mile of an existing or planned BART station. "It is very important to note," the notice continues, "that land use regulation is a Constitutionally-granted local government function of cities and counties." Tatzin warns that "bestowing land use power onto a transit agency that is unaccountable to community members is contrary to existing law and may violate Article XI, section 11 of the State Constitution." The LOCC echoes Tatzin's words. Tatzin raises several additional

concerns about the bill, including its vagueness. He raises the specter that BART could engage in land speculations, purchasing properties and imposing on them development standards in conflict with the local general plan. BART could then, he posits, lease the properties to the highest bidders.

Orinda Mayor Amy Worth said that she too is writing in opposition to the bill, as are the mayors of other cities on the BART line. Every year, she said, the state brings legislation that would erode local control, but it would be more effective to work collaboratively. Last year, according to Worth, the Assembly gave BART authority to buy land within a half mile of BART stations. The BART parking lot in Orinda, she noted, is not owned by BART but leased from Caltrans. Each community is different, according to Worth, and has different needs. Orinda is a suburban community, and residents are pretty much limited to accessing BART by driving to the station and parking. If BART were to acquire the Caltrans property, the city would work with BART, but, Worth explained, Orinda incorporated precisely for the purpose of obtaining local control over land use.

Orinda is pretty much built out at this point. Owing to the difficulty of the landscape, Worth thinks that use of electric bikes will increase, and thinks that BART should increase parking for motorcycles, scooters and electric bikes. She is also optimistic about the success of Orinda's multi-modal downtown streetscape. Worth acknowledges the need for more housing in the Bay Area. But cities don't build houses, she says. However, she pointed to the successful senior housing development, Eden. The city worked with Eden. The land was owned by the city, which found a nonprofit land developer. Eden leases the property and manages the senior development. One of the chief deterrents to improving housing stock, Worth said, is that cities no longer have access to redevelopment funds. Since that change, housing production has slowed way down, she said. Cities may zone for housing, but they can't make developers build it. She pointed to the city of Richmond as an example. On the other hand, there is significant development near BART stations in Pleasant Hill, Lafayette and Concord, and other cities in Contra Costa and Alameda Counties.

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