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Fire chief dismisses two employees for unauthorized political activity

By Nick Marnell

Two Moraga-Orinda Fire District aides acted without authorization or approval by looking up the addresses of candidates running for seats on the district board and conducting exterior hazard abatement inspections on their property. On Sept. 26, at the Orinda home owned by Division 4 independent candidate Lucy Talbot, the aides posted a 30-day notice to abate fire hazards, which required a large-scale removal of trees.

"I was flabbergasted," Talbot said. "It would have required thousands of dollars of expense. As a candidate, I want to be a model citizen, so I reached out to other board members and took it to the chief."

Fire Chief Dave Winnacker went to Talbot's house the next day and apologized to her for the actions of his employees. Talbot said the chief did a walk-through of her property and told Talbot that her home was absent any major violations.

The chief immediately terminated the two employees. He said that the aides were attempting to help the candidates by making sure their homes were not in violation of any ordinance. The employees inspected the homes of all six new candidates but issued a notice only at Talbot's.

"It was an act of complete insubordination," Talbot said. "I am convinced there was malice intended."

Local 1230 President Vince Wells said he did not know either of the two district aides, who were hourly, unrepresented employees. "I take offense that there is an assumption that, because it's a candidate we don't support, any of our members would have been behind that. That's not how we do business," he said. Winnacker released a statement afterward. "I am personally and professionally embarrassed by this unauthorized action and understand the violation of the public trust that it represents. We have conducted a top to bottom review of recent inspections and the policies and procedures that govern the district aides who conduct this work. We are conducting reset training and enhanced oversight to ensure this does not happen again. I apologize to those affected and to the community. This action does not reflect MOFD's culture or our commitment to those we serve."

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