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## MOFD Division 1 race features stark differences between candidates

By Nick Marnell



Nate Bell



Greg Baitx

Photos provided

Independent candidate and Moraga businessman Nate Bell runs against union-backed Greg Baitx, a Moraga resident and firefighter with the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District, for the Division 1 seat on the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors.

Each candidate explained his position on these current MOFD issues.

Given the recent firestorms in Napa and Santa Barbara, how much more of the MOFD budget should be allocated to fire prevention as opposed to fire suppression, where most of the dollars now go? What initiatives would you propose?

Baitx agrees that fire prevention is a major part of the fire service and the district needs to look at how it can improve its prevention efforts. "Fire suppression and prevention work hand in hand. I don't believe in taking from one to give to another," he said.

"It is sad that out of a \$25 million budget we allocate next to nothing for fire prevention strategies, unlike some of our neighboring fire districts," Bell said. He would look for every opportunity to increase district fire prevention programs and saluted Fire Chief Dave Winnacker for his creative efforts in this regard.

Two other potentially conflicting district budget priorities are paying down the unfunded pension liability and paying firefighters competitive salaries. What would you do to accomplish both goals?

Bell rejects the notion that the only valid comparable in determining firefighter compensation is the salary level of other fire districts, as fire districts vary tremendously in operations and their ability to fund future liabilities. He noted that there are more than 60 applications for a current open MOFD position for a paramedic-firefighter. "I don't understand why MOFD cannot avail itself of the supply-demand dynamic when it is in its favor, just as any private sector business would," Bell said.

Baitx stressed how lucky Moragans are to be protected by the members of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, who are held to some of the highest standards in the county. "We have to stay competitive with other departments with respect to salaries. We can still pay down our unfunded liability and stay competitive with other departments," he said.

Residents of the district have always demanded superior service. During the recession MOFD reduced daily staffing to 17 personnel from 19, which included one ambulance in Orinda that was staffed full time with firefighter-paramedics. How will you work to restore the pre-recession staffing levels?

"Returning our staffing level to 19 is a main priority for me," Baitx said. He said there are many avenues to explore for accomplishing this, including a federal grant, and taking a closer look at where money is now being allocated.

Bell said that the board should rely on the fire chief for this decision, though he noted that it is very expensive to increase staffing. He explained that the MOFD employee headcount yields a figure of about \$450,000 per head, as opposed to about \$90,000 for the Moraga School District. "In a fire district that has less than 10 percent of its calls for fire and the vast majority for medical emergencies, I believe any staffing should reflect those realities," he said.

Lafayette threatened to secede from the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District over what it claimed was inequitable service for the amount of money the city paid to the district. Many in Orinda feel similarly about MOFD: that Orinda pays more for the exact same district services than Moraga does. How do you address that longstanding complaint?

Bell is open to reviewing the claims of concerned Orinda citizens, and he notes that the terrain of Orinda is much more challenging and causes more wear and tear on the district equipment. "Having said that, I am a candidate to represent Moragans and would need clear and convincing evidence, once considering all variables, as to the inequity," Bell said.

"I have not been part of, nor have I heard of any conversations claiming inequitable service. As a resident of

Division 1, and hopefully the elected representative for Division 1, I will be the voice for Division 1," Baitx said.

#### Candidate summary

"My motivation for running is to protect service levels that I feel are under attack by our current board," said Baitx, who offers that he brings much needed fire service experience that his opponent lacks, and stresses that he is a fiscal conservative who has a personal stake in the district's finances, including paying down the long-term liabilities while balancing adequate service levels.

Baitx dismisses accusations that there is a conflict of interest with his being an East County firefighter, as he will not be able to make any decision that will affect his pay, benefits or district. "My opponent will bring nothing new to the board. We currently have directors with business backgrounds. The product of their business minds is the rebuilding of Fire Station 43 that is well over budget and 18 months behind schedule," Baitx said.

Bell said the district has continued to outspend its resources, pointing to its recent labor contract, which he says strikes him as being tone deaf to the reality of an unfunded liability of \$68 million. "Given the optimistic 7 percent discount rate used to derive that liability, I believe the unfunded liability is closer to \$100 million," Bell said. "Think about that. We have some 55 employees and a \$25 million annual budget and as much as a \$100 million unfunded liability. I see this as a serious threat to the well-being of our community. We can address this burden without cutting services, but it will not be easy."

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