

# 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 mil-

lion 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."

# Two Orindans compete to succeed Brad Barber in MOFD Division 4

By Nick Marnell



Michael Donner

She pitched for a prevention program that could support elderly or fixed income households who require expensive tree removal by having the district do the work and putting a lien on the home until it is sold, with a caveat. "This program requires cash up front for which MOFD has effectively no budget," Talbot said.

**On salaries and pension liability:**

"The firefighters union is spending tens of thousands of dollars funding their three union candidates to take over the MOFD board to vote in favor of their handsome wages and benefits," Talbot said. She does not agree with union statements that the \$68 million unfunded pension and medical liability will take care of itself as real estate values rise because property taxes go up and down with the economy and with natural disasters as well. "We don't want reduced services, layoffs and salary cuts similar to what Orinda experienced in the 2008 recession. We need to build reserves while the economy is good," Talbot said.

Donner credited the board for having made great advances in lowering district liabilities. In 2022, once the pension obligation bond is paid off, he proposes to focus on paying down the unfunded liability while addressing his No. 1 priority which is emergency service.

Believing that MOFD firefighters deserve to be compensated similarly to surrounding departments of their size, Donner said it was fortunate that the three-year contract was voted in by the district board. "Now that a new contract has been approved, I can focus on my No. 1 goal which is public safety," he said.

**On staffing levels:**

"Restoring staffing levels from 17 to 19 is a very important issue to me," Donner said. He noted that the minimum one-hour ambulance roundtrip transport time from Station 45 leaves downtown Orinda vulnerable for any type of 9-1-1 service. "I would like to restore staffing with two firefighter-paramedics on an ambulance in Orinda, which allows for an engine crew to respond to fire or other emergency needs of the district including another medical emergency," he said.

"There are other ways to improve service than just adding

more people," Talbot said. She explained that the district already has increased the number of available ambulances from two to four since the layoffs and moved the dedicated ambulance to central Orinda, in addition to the one in central Moraga. She proposes to learn from other districts which post ambulances where the greatest need exists, not just in a station waiting for a call.

**On municipal inequity:**

Talbot said it was her understanding that the community was never given a public document disclosure by the Orinda City Council, any committee or county agency that provided a quantified analysis of the breakdown of expense allocation between municipalities. "Until this question is addressed, there will always be doubt in some taxpayer's minds about fair ex-

pense allocation," Talbot said.

Donner said the distribution of county assessed taxes is not the responsibility of the MOFD board. He noted that there are two fire stations in Moraga and three in Orinda, and also hundreds of Orinda residents that are serviced by Station 41 in Moraga as their first due engine or ambulance. "This subject has been reviewed by two separate panels and no new information has been revealed," Donner said.

**Candidate summary:**

"The recent fires throughout California have proved that preparation and planning for fire is critical," Donner said. He feels strongly about educating the community on how to prepare for a wildfire and said he has been working with school districts on this subject for many years. "Additionally, I

would like to educate our community on how to maneuver garage doors during power outages," he said. "There were several fire fatalities in the Atlas and Tubbs fires in the North Bay less than a year ago. Many of those fatalities occurred in their garages."

"I'm an active member of the community whose business experience managing finances and budgets for my own \$12.5 million, 33-year-old company, as well as experience working with the public sector on budgeting and sales of emergency communications equipment, prepares me to add value serving on the board," said Talbot, who stressed she will not be swayed by organizations attempting to influence her to further their own agendas and thus will not accept contributions from any organization.

Lucy Talbot

Photos provided

Independent candidate and Orinda businesswoman Lucy Talbot runs against union-backed Michael Donner, a retired firefighter, for the Division 4 seat on the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors.

The candidates explained their positions on current MOFD issues. (See article on Division 1 for the questions in their entirety.)

**On fire prevention:**

Donner recommends adding one additional full-time fire prevention officer to help address the increasing demands due to high fire danger and the new construction in the district because the current staffing level of 1.5 makes it challenging to run a comprehensive, effective fire prevention program.

"I would like to see an emphasis on prevention programs such as defensible space, weed abatement, notification and strategic evacuation plans that are shared with the community while collaborating with Public Works, Orinda Police, EBMUD, Cal Trans and PG&E. In addition we need to have a senior citizen outreach program," Donner said.

"Fire prevention is a very cost-effective way to lower risk of a firestorm in our community," Talbot said. She explained that the Circle Oaks community, which survived the Napa firestorm, spent approximately \$330 per year per household over 12 years to make the community Fire Safe, with most of the funding coming from outside grants.

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