



Published October 17th, 2018

Split MOFD board approves three-year labor contract with firefighters union

By Nick Marnell

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District came within one vote of a near meltdown.

A deeply divided MOFD board narrowly approved a three-year labor contract with the firefighters union Oct. 3 and staved off an impasse and a likely unfair labor practice charge filed by the union had the agreement not been passed. The board voted 3-2 in favor, with the swing vote coming from Director Steve Anderson, who had previously balked that the agreement was overly generous to the union.

"It was political suicide," Anderson said of his vote to approve the agreement. "But it was the best thing to do for the district. We needed that so that MOFD can move on, and the chief can do the job he wants to do." Anderson is fighting a hotly contested Division 3 race against a union-backed candidate and an independent. The agreement includes a 13 percent wage increase over the three years, a portion of which is a 5 percent equity adjustment, used to address how far district employee wages had drifted below comparable compensation in the market. "It was a way to catch up to the median," said district lead negotiator Jeff Sloan.

"I am still in shock," said Division 3 independent candidate Red Smith. "I guess it was a parting gift to labor from the three board directors that are either retiring or being challenged for their board seats."

Kathleen Famulener, one of the two directors who is retiring, voted for the agreement. Famulener has been in favor of pay increases for the rank and file since the beginning of negotiations, to the extent that she protested the funding of the district pension stabilization trust in order to have more money available for firefighter compensation. Outgoing President Brad Barber, hoping to bring the community together, cast a yes vote despite his reservations. "The financial condition of the district is a serious problem," Barber said. "We don't have enough revenue and we have too much pension liability."

Director Craig Jorgens, who voted no, disagreed with the comparables used to arrive at the equity adjustments, insisting that salary and benefits - not just salary - should have been included in the formula. Jorgens also called the negotiation process broken, complaining that the public only saw information once the tentative agreement was reached, allowing not enough time for citizen input.

The other no vote was cast by John Jex, the director who based his action on what he often cites as the tenuous financial condition of the district. "Our general fund reserves are totally inadequate," Jex said.

According to the latest audited district financial statements, MOFD reports an unfunded pension and retiree health care liability of \$68 million and a general fund reserve of nearly \$5 million.

With such a bitterly divided final vote, neither management nor labor engaged in any high fives or victory laps, and reactions were muted, if any. "We looked forward to having this contract settled so we can move on to other things," said Vince Wells, Local 1230 president. Fire Chief Dave Winnacker declined to comment on the agreement.

The new labor pact runs through June 30, 2021.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA