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Two Orindans compete to succeed Brad Barber in MOFD Division 4

By Nick Marnell



Michael Donner



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.

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 expense 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.

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