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Plenty of money and plenty of nastiness define MOFD board races

By Nick Marnell

The 2018 election for the directorships of three Moraga-Orinda Fire District divisions features not only the most expensive district campaigns ever run but also lays claim to the nastiest, with the degree of campaign vitriol rarely seen in the 21-year history of the district.

According to the Contra Costa County Elections Division, through the third week of October candidates Greg Baitx, Steve Danziger and Michael Donner have received more than \$26,000 in campaign contributions, with \$1,000 for each coming from the local firefighters union and \$21,000 from the California Firefighters Political Action Committee in Sacramento - \$8,000 for Danziger, \$7,000 for Donner and \$6,000 for Baitx.

Candidates Nathan Bell, Red Smith and Lucy Talbot have raised more than \$13,000 through loans and contributions, mostly from individuals, including current MOFD board member Craig Jorgens and Orinda firebrand Steve Cohn. The three candidates' individual totals fall within \$800 of each other. Division 3 incumbent Steve Anderson reports no campaign contributions. (Full disclosure: this media outlet has benefitted from the campaign spending.)

The ads themselves are fairly straightforward, but the vitriol stems from the 21st century version of the old town hall: social media. Many of the social media comments denounced the union-backed candidates, who were pegged as out to take over MOFD in order to spend more of the district budget on firefighter salaries. The concept of union-backed candidates, or firefighters themselves, sitting on the board was blasted as a major conflict of interest.

Comments bashing the non-union-backed candidates painted them as uninformed and dispassionate. They were skewered as investment managers who intended to put public employees in their place and treat them as nothing more than an investment portfolio, and were labeled as clueless of the firefighting profession. For their part, the local firefighters have avoided the negativity. "We're staying above the fray and we refuse to disparage our opponents," said Capt. Lucas Lambert, MOFD union representative. "Our mission remains the same: the dedication to serve the community and the public."

But if this local race follows the pattern of major national and regional elections, with a week to go and three of the five MOFD board seats up for election, the best - or worst - may be yet to come.

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