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## MOFD elections: Firefighters union achieves 100 percent ROI

By Nick Marnell

Voters in the Moraga-Orinda Fire District rejected the notion that a candidate backed by the firefighters union would present a conflict of interest as district director by placing three union-backed candidates on the MOFD governing board in the November election. The three new directors, comprising a board majority, took office Dec. 5.

The firefighters union contributed more than \$30,000 to back the campaigns of Greg Baitx, Steve Danziger and Michael Donner, who defeated candidates Nathan Bell in Division 1, Steve Anderson and Red Smith in Division 3, and Lucy Talbot in Division 4. Opponents of the union-backed candidates raised less than half that amount, with incumbent Anderson reporting no campaign contributions.

Rarely has one board seat been contested in any election in the district's 21-year history, let alone the three this year. Not only did the elected directors benefit from the political campaigns but so too did district residents, who were treated to analyses of fire issues they may have never understood or even heard about in their lives. Discussions on topics like net pension liability, adequate staffing, response times and tax equity bombarded local media outlets for months. The electorate, which disregarded the endorsement of Bell, Smith and Talbot by a competing regional newspaper, was likely the best informed ever in the district. In Division 1, voters chose Baitx, a firefighter with the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District, whose family has a history in Moraga and in the fire service. Danziger, a retired fire department administrator, won the Division 3 seat by the widest margin of the three. And Donner, businessman and retired firefighter, eked out a 123-vote victory in Division 4.

For Bell, it was his second try at securing a district board seat, having lost to Kathleen Famulener in 2014.

"It was an honor to participate in the democratic process. I thank all who supported my candidacy.

Congratulations to Mr. Baitx," Bell said.

Talbot also remained gracious in defeat, promising to continue to make her voice heard. "I plan to be involved in MOFD citizen committees to help communicate the financial standing of the district, and progress implementing critical programs - such as prevention - our citizens have been asking for," she said.

The most startling outcome occurred in Division 3, where Anderson's six-year term on the board ended abruptly after his third-place finish. "It's clear that money talks," he said. "I never realized that on the local level." But Anderson took full responsibility for his defeat, saying that he dropped the ball by not confirming that he was even going to run until it was too late to secure endorsements.

Donner dismissed the idea that he owes the firefighters union for its financial support. "I think the public believes that we are individual thinkers and not in the union's pocket," Donner said of the three new board members.

Anderson, who spent hours coaching and mentoring the newly elected directors, concurred. "I believe they are prepared to do what's right for the district," he said.

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