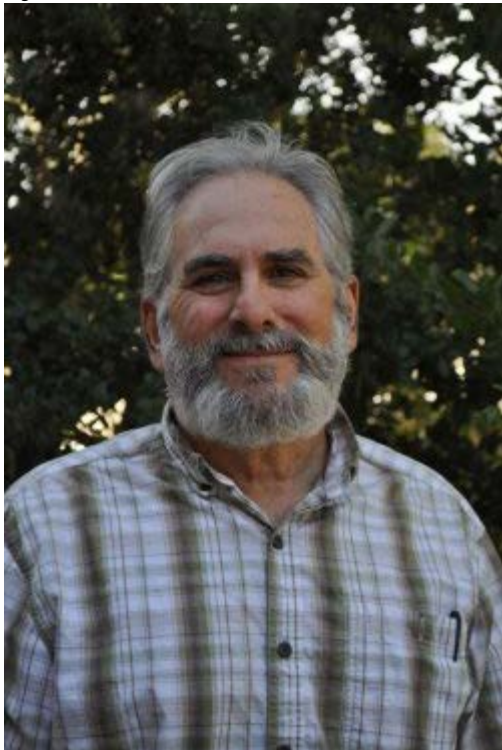


Published January 23rd, 2019

MOFD board president determined to reverse poor public perception

By Nick Marnell



Steven Danziger Photo provided

Rarely does an interviewee ask for more time as the session winds down, but Steven Danziger, high-energy president of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors, did just that, as he outlined his plans to change the negative perception of the district board. "We as a new board can turn that around," he said.

Danziger has his work cut out for him.

The MOFD board made national news in 2009 for enabling the pension spiking of its retiring fire chief, providing him an annual retirement benefit higher than his salary; five years later, in a rare public spat between government agencies, a Contra Costa County supervisor rebuked the district board, calling MOFD "a perfect example of a special district with a poor governance structure"; in 2018, despite a public plea from town officials to support the Moraga storm drain measure, the MOFD directors could not decide among themselves which way to vote and declined to submit a ballot; and a recently retired district director called the board he served on "dysfunctional."

Then, with a chance to ease public concerns that the firefighters union planned to "take over the fire district" - since the three newly elected, union-supported directors formed a board majority - the board laid to waste years of district tradition and elected Danziger, one of the union-backed directors, as its 2019 president.

not smiling when he said it.

"I got a lot of emails on that," Danziger said, and he was

Key to the turnaround that Danziger envisions is accessibility, and he will soon begin holding open public sessions every other Thursday at Si Si Caffe in Moraga. He also plans to urge frequent board member attendance at public meetings. Danziger cited director Michael Donner, who attended the Jan. 10 meeting of the Local Agency Formation Commission. "It was the first time we've seen anyone from MOFD in more than five years," said Lou Ann Texiera, LAFCO executive officer.

Danziger listed visibility and responsiveness as further components to the board turnaround. "The chief is out there a lot," he said, referring to the intense outside schedule that Fire Chief Dave Winnacker keeps. "We need to support him and see how the public is responding."

Also in need of support are the firefighters, said Danziger, who worked for many years as an administrator in the Oakland Fire Department. "Oakland firefighters were always looked at as heroes. Here, they don't get that same treatment," he said, though wary MOFD stakeholders will be quick to call out the board if it goes too far in support of the rank and file.

The bottom line is simply that Danziger and his fellow MOFD directors will be evaluated on how successfully they carry out the mission of the board, as stated on the district website: To provide strategic leadership, policy and direction as well as fiscal oversight.

"Give us a chance," said Danziger, still sensitive to the mixed public reaction over his election as board president. "Give us time, and we'll show by our actions that we are looking out for the whole district and not just for special interests."

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