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Fire district on target - and then some - at midyear review

By Nick Marnell

Few questions, and virtually no complaints, surrounded the midyear review presented by the staff of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District Feb. 19, with the district financial condition trending so positively that one board member called for further discussion of an increase in daily on-duty staffing.

Administrative Services Director Gloriann Sasser presented the board of directors a detailed examination of fiscal year 2020 revenue and expenses, which showed the district with a projected general fund surplus of \$872,000, bringing the district reserve balance to \$8.7 million. The reserve balance projects at 35% of general fund revenue, exceeding the district policy of 17% but short of the goal of 50%.

Highlights of the midyear review included a nearly \$1 million increase in property tax revenue to \$22.1 million, a 4.5% increase over the \$21.1 million received last year. Property tax accounts for 88% of district revenue.

Commensurate with the revenue increase came a \$1.2 million decrease in expenses, mainly due to administrative position vacancies and a reduction in overtime and strike team activity. Total general fund expenses equal \$24.2 million, of which 89% are employee salaries and benefits. (The difference between revenue and expenses does not gel with the surplus because the district reclassified more than \$1 million of fire flow tax revenue out of the general fund.)

The numbers presented were enough for the board to unanimously vote to fund two of its trusts with the entire amount budgeted: \$1 million into its pension stabilization trust and \$559,000 into the district other post-employment benefits (retiree health care) trust. The trusts are used to prefund pension costs and to reduce the district OPEB obligation.

Director Gregory Baitx capped the meeting by calling for discourse on an increase in district daily staffing from 17 to 19 personnel, with the intent to fully staff Medic 45, the cross-staffed ambulance in Orinda. Three years ago, MOFD received federal grant funding to hire four firefighters but used the money to fill overtime positions, not to increase staffing.

The firefighters union has been frustrated over the reduced daily staffing model on the books since 2013. "Our mission statement says 'to provide the highest level of emergency service' and that's exactly what we are trying to accomplish," said Capt. Mark McCullah, district labor representative. "We are confident this board will finally do the right thing for our community."

The district has declined to increase daily staffing to 19, citing additional annual costs of between \$1 million and \$1.4 million, though the board voted in 2014 to temporarily raise staffing during that year's fire season because of the drought. The staffing issue is expected to come back to the board on March 25.

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[back](#)

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