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Candidate differences define MOFD Division 5 race

By Nick Marnell



Sharon Girdlestone



Craig Jorgens Photos provided

Challenger Sharon Girdlestone, a local business owner, faces incumbent Craig Jorgens, a retired business executive, for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District Division 5 governing board seat. The candidates answered questions about controversial district topics.

On the amount of money the district should allocate annually for fire prevention:

Girdlestone pointed out that even though the \$29.7 million district budget shows only \$834,000 allocated for fire prevention in 2021, MOFD spends much more on activities and programs, such as prescribed burns and evacuation drills that are not included in that figure.

"Fire prevention should be priority, and a thorough review of all funds should be done to determine if funds can be used for prevention," said Girdlestone, noting

that the district has been successful in receiving grants from the state and private sources, and it should continue to explore those funding sources.

"This year, less than \$300,000 will go directly to fuels mitigation at MOFD's expense; the rest is for management salaries, enforcement, and education," countered Jorgens. "I think a much greater share of your tax dollars should go to actually helping remove flammable materials from every resident's property to make the entire community safe from catastrophic fires."

Jorgens noted that, in 2020 alone, the district spent \$100,000 on a wood chipper program that brought many neighbors together to become Firewise, and in five months, 190 tons of fuel were removed at no cost to residents. "We need more chippers to serve all district residents to advance this goal," he said.

On the recently approved three-year labor agreement for employees of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, calling for a 5% annual wage increase over the length of the contract, and how that contract may affect the MOFD labor negotiations:

"Our firefighters work hard, and I firmly believe they deserve the same Cost of Living (CPI) based wage and benefit increases that are given to the hard working teachers, federal, state and city employees who live in our community," Jorgens said.

Girdlestone said she understands that the ConFire contract is an anomaly in the Bay Area. She believes that, in light of the negative effect of COVID-19 on the overall economy and its potential effect on property tax revenue - which is the district's primary funding source - MOFD will be in a good negotiating position. "Any increase in salary or benefits should be no more than rate of inflation," said Girdlestone, stressing that MOFD needs to remain competitive with other jurisdictions in order to retain and attract the best employees.

On a sound district general fund reserve policy:

"The present policy of 17% minimum with a goal of 50% was recently approved by a majority of the board. The present reserve is approximately 30%," Girdlestone said. With the district projecting a deficit of approximately \$1.5 million in the coming fiscal year, she said that it appears to be fiscally responsible to maintain the policy as it is.

Jorgens said that today, most fire districts and cities have reserves of at least 50% - equal to six months of expenditures - to prevent operational shortfalls. He noted that, in 2008-12, MOFD was forced to reduce emergency services to the community because its reserves were insufficient to weather the financial crisis. "This year, our revenues are already below expectations," Jorgens said. "We need both good spending discipline and solid reserves so we will not be forced to reduce our emergency services in this current or the next crisis."

Summary:

Girdlestone told a local news outlet in August that she was withdrawing from the race for "personal reasons and a possible move," but she said she is now fully committed to securing the MOFD board seat.

"After experiencing a close call just feet away from our home on El Toyonal a few months ago, not to mention our friends in L.A. losing homes to fire, I have a very high appreciation for the work that our fire

department provides our community," she said. "I will be looking at every way possible to make our community safer."

The challenger stressed her ability to maintain good relationships, the "key to getting things done," Girdlestone said. "I will bring a new perspective if I serve. I will also bring transparency, honesty and will work to bring the community together, not divide it."

Jorgens insists that the safety of its residents must be the district's first priority, and he vows to continue to identify and support the deployment of advanced technology for early fire detection and automated triggering of evacuations.

"Let's strive to make all of Orinda and Moraga Firewise, safe from increasingly prevalent wildfires to help ensure the availability of affordable home insurance for everyone," the incumbent said. "According to Cal professor John Radke, a disaster modeling expert, fire prevention is the only way to stop wildfires from devastating our community."

With his 30 years of executive management experience in both the public and private sector, and a technology background, Jorgens said he will continue to guide sound governance decisions at MOFD.

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