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## Firefighter takes on incumbent in MOFD Division 2 race

By Nick Marnell



John Jex



Nathan Smith Photos provided

Challenger Nathan Smith, a firefighter-paramedic with the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, squares off against incumbent John Jex, a retired Deloitte auditor, for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District Division 2 governing board seat. The candidates answered questions about controversial district topics.

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

Smith said that the \$834,000 designated for fire prevention in 2021 is deceptive. "This figure is inclusive of prevention staff only. Hours spent by suppression personnel to plan and implement prevention efforts like fuel-reducing burns, fire trail maintenance and public education are not included," Smith said.

The challenger favors a balanced approach by the district, incorporating prevention and suppression, to reduce community risk. Smith cited the \$7.7 million in grants MOFD obtained last year which beefed up prevention efforts. "MOFD must continue to make every effort to augment tight budget dollars with state and federal grants," he said.

Jex said that fire prevention efforts should be expanded, but it would require cuts in other areas, because the district projects a 2021 budget deficit of \$1.5 million.

"The major funding for all our services comes from property taxes," he said. "Of this amount 79% is paid to cover salaries and overtime to the employees. Over 18% goes to cover current payments on existing debt and interest incurred for past unfunded pension benefits and for other debts."

That leaves little discretionary funds for other services, Jex 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 existing contract provided for increases for each of the past three years, which was in line with other fire districts at that time," Jex said.

He explained that increases in salary for firefighters should take into consideration projected increases or decreases in district revenue, any additional payments needed to cover district unfunded pension and medical benefit liabilities, and community requests to expand fire protection services, including support and expansion of Firewise neighborhood activities.

"I look at negotiations as an opportunity to provide the best service to the community," Smith said. He believes that the district needs to maintain short- and long-term fiscal responsibility with a sustainable and balanced budget, while providing for all aspects of fire suppression, prevention and emergency medical services.

"MOFD must balance those fiscal constraints while maintaining itself in a competitive regional job market and attracting qualified employees who meet the high standards of providing for this community," Smith said.

On a sound district general fund reserve policy.

Smith insists that a healthy reserve and being fiscally conservative are necessary to ensure the economic health of MOFD, with the district board policy calling for a general fund reserve of 17% of annual expenditures, and a goal of 50%.

"The 17% minimum needs to be evaluated annually during budgetary workshops by the board as being an adequately healthy minimum while considering the long-range outlook and economy," Smith said. "In better economic times the reserve could be built up with the understanding that challenging economic times might see a decrease in overall percentage."

Jex noted that the operating budget for fiscal 2021 results in a projected general fund balance of \$7 million. "This amount would cover expenses for only three months, requiring the district to borrow from the county to cover operations for the balance of the year," Jex said. "Most fire districts and cities have general fund balances of more than 50% of revenue."

Jex said that borrowing to fund current operations is not a prudent fiscal policy and could result in the district having to declare a financial emergency.

#### Summary

"My No. 1 priority will always be to the residents of the community," Smith said. "I will work tirelessly to help MOFD provide the excellent all-risk service our towns demand."

Smith said he will draw upon his private sector and relevant firefighting experience to allow him to make sound decisions to maintain fiscal discipline while providing facilities, equipment and programs to carry out the mission of the district. He plans to work to ensure greater collaboration across fire prevention, suppression, emergency medical services and community programs.

"Through greater balance and alignment, MOFD will become more agile and responsive to the community," Smith said.

Jex said he plans to focus more on fire prevention while still providing state-of-the-art fire suppression and emergency medical services, utilizing advanced technology to leverage MOFD's physical assets and well-trained personnel. He also intends to represent the community by obtaining the proper allocation of resources to ensure fast emergency response times and by maximizing the use of taxpayer funds.

"I will use my experience to ensure prudence and transparency in MOFD finances," Jex said. The incumbent said he will also ensure that MOFD becomes financially stronger and able to meet both the community's expanding needs, as well as the district obligation to pay its growing unfunded pension and medical benefit liabilities.

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