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Suggestion to consolidate MOFD with ConFire causes community outrage

By Vera Kochan

With a point that has since become moot, the mere hint of consolidating the Moraga-Orinda Fire District with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District caused more controversy since the theory that Mrs. O'Leary's cow was responsible for the Chicago Fire.

During the March 17 MOFD Regular Board Meeting, President of Firefighters Local 1230 Vincent Wells brought up the topic of consolidation in reference to other fire districts that were looking into annexation as a means to minimize infrastructure and training costs. According to the minutes of that meeting, "Wells stated that their membership in MOFD expressed an interest in looking at consolidating or annexing into the Contra Costa Fire District," and requested the board to examine the pros and cons of such a venture.

Board President Craig Jorgens listed the many reasons why Moraga and Orinda residents were willing to pay for the customized service and stated that the issue wasn't finances, but rather the loss of local control. He felt that Moraga and Orinda should be allowed to weigh in on the process.

Director John Jex brought up the 2009 attempt at consolidation that was not supported and failed, while Director Steven Danziger recommended that MOFD observe the current process that East Contra Costa County and Hercules are going through. Director Gregory Baitx suggested that consideration be given to the consolidation with regards to the financial benefits of a larger organization.

During the April 21 MOFD Board Meeting, Baitx, during the Future Agenda Items portion, asked that the possibility of consolidation with Contra Costa County Fire Protection District be looked into financially. The request set off a flurry of responses from local residents, and discussions at both the Moraga Town and Orinda City councils.

At its May 12 meeting the Moraga Town Council discussed sending a letter from Mayor Mike McCluer's office to MOFD's Board of Directors opposing a study of the consolidation/dissolution process.

The mayor's letter gave kudos to MOFD as "one of the highest performing and innovative fire districts in the State of California. The town of Moraga and its citizens have greatly benefited from the high-quality paramedic and fire protection services that have protected this community since MOFD's inception in 1997." The letter went on to mention the unparalleled emergency response times; the locally elected board that represents the specific interests of residents; the local control over the use of tax dollars; the many fire prevention programs; MOFD's knowledge of the local terrain; and the proactive approach towards emergency preparedness.

"This is not the first time that the issue of whether MOFD should be absorbed into the ConFire has arisen," the mayor's letter concluded. "As you may recall, in 2009, the Contra Costa County LAFCO Municipal Service Review of Fire Emergency Service Providers recommended that consideration be given to merging MOFD into the ConFire. The Councils of both the Town of Moraga and the City of Orinda unanimously voted to oppose that option publicly." The town council included with the opposition letter all of the emails received from residents voicing their disapproval to any merger.

During the Public Comment portion, one of the first speakers was Wells who asked the council to hold off on sending an opposition letter. "We do have a lot of problems right now with several of the board and how firefighters are treated out there in comparison to the six agencies I represent," he said. "They have some of the worst, I will call them, benefits and what-not, so it's a definite concern from them about whether or not they want to be under this fire board. We're working through that, but that's something that I would just say - put that off. We're not looking at doing this, moving forward to this, we know that the board of supervisors, the fire chief - nobody's interested in pursuing moving forward with any kind of consolidation. It's kind of an overreaction at this point, so we would ask that you table writing any letters, because I say, on behalf of the firefighters, it's almost like you're taking a position ahead of even hearing our concerns." Another public comment came from 15-year veteran of MOFD, Captain Mark McCullah, who said the suggestion to review potential consolidation was "simply a due process thing, to see what does the process look like." He went on to defend Baitx, who initially broached the topic be included as a future agenda item, as performing due diligence, and said that the director himself doesn't support consolidation. McCullah stressed that the firefighters are neutral on the topic.

Passionate public comments also came in the form of testimonials from residents who, in the past, needed emergency medical attention and felt their lives were saved thanks to MOFD. Additionally, resident Dick Olsen provided an extensive historical overview that referenced all aspects of the MOFD. Former mayor, Mike Metcalf, said that he'd heard the same kind of statements from Wells back in 2009, the last time a consolidation was proposed. "It became clear, in a very short time, that there was virtually no support within either Moraga or Orinda or Canyon for consolidation. Why is this coming up again? My conclusion is that there's probably some special interests at play here. This is a union which claims to be supporting the interests of constituents. Well, the constituents here seem to be the firefighters. I have the utmost respect for firefighters, but honest to God, they're employed to serve the residents of the three communities who are actually beneficiaries to their service. Why we would even entertain this idea of consolidation is beyond me."

Metcalf's personal recommendation to the council was to submit an opposition letter immediately, "because if you don't, this thing is going to fester and they're going to go through a political process which is going to try to gain support for them."

In a May 13 email, Contra Costa County Supervisor Candace Andersen stated, "The issue of annexation of

MOFD to ConFire has never been discussed or even considered by ConFire staff or the ConFire Board, and there is no valid reason for us to do so. MOFD is a well funded, and well run Fire Protection District. They are meeting their response times, they provide outstanding fire response and emergency medical services, and they have a very robust plan to address emergency preparedness and woodland fires. I would not support annexing a fire district when the local leaders and community are vehemently opposed." At the May 19 MOFD Board Meeting Baitx said that his intentions were misinterpreted and he had requested that the agenda item regarding the consolidation be removed, but Jorgens replied that he wanted it left on in order to allow for what he expected to be an overwhelming amount of public comment. MOFD received 240 written comments prior to the meeting. After Orinda Mayor Amy Worth read the city council's letter in opposition and Moraga Vice Mayor Steve Woehleke reiterated Moraga's stand on the situation, over 15 individuals made public comments against the consolidation study. The MOFD Board of Directors instructed staff not to spend anymore time, money or effort on this issue. As Jex put it, "It's a dead issue, and I hope it dies today."

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