



Published July 21st, 2021

## Town sends opposition letter to MOFD board regarding possible fire flow tax rate hike

By Vera Kochan

The Moraga Town Council at its July 14 meeting discussed an upcoming Moraga-Orinda Fire District board meeting agenda item, which involves the possibility of raising Moraga's Fire Flow Tax. Moraga's zone not only contains the town itself, but portions of Orinda and unincorporated Contra Costa County. As defined in the 2019 Lamorinda Weekly article, "MOFD Fire Flow Tax Unchanged for 2019-20," a fire flow tax "quantifies the risk of fire to a parcel. MOFD uses a complex formula to determine the number of fire flow units allotted to a parcel, but key variables in determining the figure are parcel size, the installation of a sprinkler system and construction type. In short, the more of a fire hazard a property is, the more the 'fire flow' - water - is needed to save it."

Currently the FFT in both Moraga and Orinda zones are assessed at \$0.06 per fire flow unit. That rate was originally capped in Moraga's FFT zone. However, according to Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg's July 14 staff report to the town council, "In 1992, the voters in the former Moraga Fire Protection District, fearing a reduction of property tax revenue funding, voted to increase the cap of the FFT to thirty cents (\$0.30) per square foot. The property tax revenue reduction never occurred, and the FFT has not exceeded six cents in the Moraga FFT zone."

When MOFD formed in 1997, Orinda's FFT rate of six cents was established to match Moraga's, at which point both zones have been assessed identical amounts. That rate differed by one cent during 2006-07, when Orinda's FFT zone needed funding to improve its water system.

The staff report points out the benefits Moraga and Orinda share in having consolidated high quality fire services, better response times and taxpayer savings, while stating that MOFD's finances are in great shape and show no evidence of requiring additional funding for capital.

The town council discussed key points of the opposition letter coming from the mayor's office, one of which was to note that MOFD's funding has been addressed several times, most notably in a June 15, 2016 MOFD staff report entitled "Analysis of Funding Equity Between Taxpayers of Orinda and Moraga". This report maintains that MOFD was formed in order to provide no separation of service between Moraga and Orinda zones with an equalized FFT. Furthermore, in 1999, MOFD's move to combine financial operating and capital accounts served to acknowledge its commitment to integrated fire services.

The mayor's letter also states that changing to a separate accounting system for each municipality could impact the quality of services and reveal that Moraga's property owners could pay more for their share of service due to the higher cost of providing service to Orinda. Some of the factors include, "large portions of the Orinda FFT zone is in a Cal Fire designated very high fire hazard severity zone; emergency responses to many properties in the Orinda FFT zone are impeded due to the rural, narrow and hilly nature of many roads; the necessity of ongoing extensive fire prevention work in North Orinda; inadequate water supply issues in parts of North Orinda; and that three of the five MOFD fire stations are in Orinda." The letter also notes that Orinda's fire insurance rates are higher than Moraga's and is an indication of why their FFT rates should actually be higher.

In conclusion, the council urged the MOFD Board of Directors to approve a continued six cent FFT rate for both Moraga and Orinda and requested that the board "not spend taxpayer dollars on an expensive analysis to explore changes to the integrated system to deliver fire services that benefits ratepayers in all areas of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District."

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[back](#)

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