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MOFD directs chief to form working group on single role paramedic staffing

By Sora O'Doherty

The Moraga Orinda Fire District on May 18 once again took up the topic of increasing staffing at Fire Station 45 in downtown Orinda. From 2007 to 2013, staffing had been increased from 17 to 19, with a dedicated ambulance service at Station 45, but in 2013 the district reverted to the current cross-staffing model, under which the crew of Engine 45 staffs the ambulance when responding to emergency medical service (EMS) calls.

In his staff report to the board, MOFD Fire Chief Dave Winnacker reported that this requires taking Engine 45 out of service for the full length of the EMS call and creates a gap in coverage for a median time of 62 minutes per call.

MOFD's second ambulance unit is staffed with a dedicated crew at Station 41 in Moraga. Winnacker explained that the reason the ambulance call outs can take more than an hour is owing to the lack of local hospitals. When the ambulance from Station 45 is on an EMS call, Engine 45 cannot be used because the firefighters are with the ambulance.

This issue was raised again at the April 20 board meeting, when Directors Michael Donner and Steve Danziger requested a staff report. In addition, Local 1230 Union Representative Jacob Airola recently raised an instance where there was a house fire in north Orinda, but the ambulance from Station 45 was transporting a patient to the hospital, which meant that Engine 45 remained idle. The engine from Station 43, St. Stephens, responded, but there was a delay for several minutes.

Fortunately, the fire was contained to the chimney where it started, with no damage to the rest of the structure or any other structures. There were no injuries or fatalities. Winnacker, using the time it took for the battalion truck from Station 45 to reach the site of the fire, estimated the delay at about two minutes. For each structure fire called in to 911, MOFD dispatches four engines, a ladder truck, two battalion chiefs, and an ambulance. Winnacker explained that MOFD wants 15 to 20 firefighters at an incident. MOFD also receives help from the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District as needed.

The chief's report contains extensive documentation of incidents and response time. Winnacker requested that the board provide directions to staff on four alternatives: 1) to maintain status quo of 17 suppressing members per day with two vacation relief positions per shift; 2) increase staffing to 19 suppression members per day with existing authorized positions; 3) increase staffing to 19 suppression members per day with two additional vacation relief positions per shift; or 4) develop proposal to implement single role paramedic staffing.

Alternative one would require a substantial amount of overtime, which would require the district to meet and confer with union representatives. Director Danziger also pointed out that mandatory overtime leads to more burnout and more injuries to firefighters. Under alternative four, Station 45's ambulance would be staffed with paramedics, and possibly with EMTs who are not firefighters, which would leave the firefighters available for call-outs on Engine 45. The staff report explains that the use of firefighter/paramedics is no longer widespread in the East Bay owing to increased staffing costs, although it is retained in the city of Alameda and some other smaller departments because there is an insufficient call volume to support single-role positions.

Director Craig Jorgans noted that north Orinda response times are the worst in the district. He was definitely in favor of the chief forming a working group to discuss increased service levels. A working group formed by the chief was favored over a group established by the MOFD board, because the working group formed by the chief would not be a Brown Act body.

Winnacker asked the board to give him specific directions on what the group was to consider, as the board has considered increasing the number of firefighters several times and already has considerable information about that. It was agreed that Winnacker's group should work on alternative four only, to develop a proposal to implement single-role paramedic staffing. When that group reports back, the board will then be in a position to consider all four options.

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