

Published October 26th, 2022

Union support again an issue at MOFD Board election forum

By Sora O'Doherty



MOFD District 4 incumbent Michael Donner (left) and challenger Michael Roemer speak at the Oct. 13 candidates forum hosted by the League of Women Voters Diablo Valley. Photo provided

12 issue, focused on Districts 1 and 3, while the second covered Districts 3 and 4. District 2 is not included in this election. At both candidate forums the issue of potential consolidation of MOFD with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District arose. In response to questions from the public, all the candidates avowed their opposition to any possible merger at both forums. District 1 incumbent Gregory Baitx had asked that the question of a merger be agendized last year, which caused a public outcry. Baitx is not running for reelection, so candidates Hasler and Young are vying for that seat on the board.

The second forum on Oct. 13 was the first appearance by Roemer, who is challenging incumbent Donner. Roemer, a 30-year resident of Orinda, is a retired federal prosecutor, a trained CERT volunteer, an MOFD support volunteer and a Fire Ambassador. He opined that his legal experience would be an asset to the MOFD board.

Roemer, in answer to a question about the relationship between the board and the union, suggested that "there are times when the board has to say, `we don't agree with the union.'" He also highlighted the differences in funding, saying, "When a candidate is funded entirely by one entity, it creates a perception that something is expected in return." Danziger took offense at Romer's suggestion, and said he was not 100% funded by the union, and didn't believe that Donner was either, but added that he was proud to have the support of the firefighters.

Donner, against whom Roemer is running, said that the relationship between the board and the union is friendly, but that there had been a problem in the past with attracting new hires and having low numbers of firefighters. He said that the board had reached out to the union to adjust requirements, and it had been agreed to change the hiring process to increase the pool of firefighters and increase retention as well. Dell'Aquila said that he did not have knowledge about the relationship, but praised the department for its very quick response time and expressed total faith in MOFD.

Candidates were queried about how to encourage public entities who own land in the Lamorinda area to remove dead trees and brush on their property and otherwise comply with the fire code. Danziger suggested that, in light of the failure to comply with the fire code and recent issues regarding access to Bollinger Canyon, a summit should be convened to discuss the issue. Donner mentioned that this is an ongoing issue for the district and may be the subject of litigation. "If we win," he said, "we will lead departments around the state." Donner cited Caltrans and UC Berkeley as being among the public entities that "don't feel that they have to play by our rules." Dell'Aquila noted that PG&E has come under a lot of fire lately, so they are doing a lot to mitigate the situation. "Others have not been in the spotlight, so we need to put them in the spotlight to encourage action," he suggested.

Another ConFire related question asked how MOFD's pension fund compared to ConFire in terms of solvency. Again, no candidate favored merging MOFD with ConFire, but Danziger said that "over the last four years [MOFD's] finances were the strongest they've ever been," and that the board had continued to aggressively fund unfunded pension liability.

"In the next 12 to 15 years," he said, "pensions will be 100% funded."

With three seats in three districts of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District up for election in the general election of 2022, the six candidates running are in one of two slates. Incumbents Steven Danziger and Michael Donner are joined by candidate Christopher Young on the slate funded almost exclusively by the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1230 Political Activity Committee. They are opposed by candidates Gregory Allan Hasler, Vincent James Dell'Aquila, and Michael Roemer, whose campaigns are largely funded by Moraga-Orinda Citizens for Fire Safety Supporting Hasler (MOFD District 1), Dell'Aquila (3), and Roemer (4), with additional large donations from Hasler to his own campaign and Orinda resident Steve Harwood to Dell'Aquila's campaign. Candidates are required to disclose donations, and the information is available to the public on the website of Contra Costa County Elections.

There were two forums for MOFD candidates in October. The first, reported by the Lamorinda Weekly in the Oct.

In answer to other questions, the candidates expressed their views on outreach and communications. The MOFD's candidates forum can be viewed in its entirety at <https://youtu.be/YO4bOZHv5kA> Information about donations to candidates is available from Contra Costa County Elections at <https://public.netfile.com/pub2/?AID=CCC>

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