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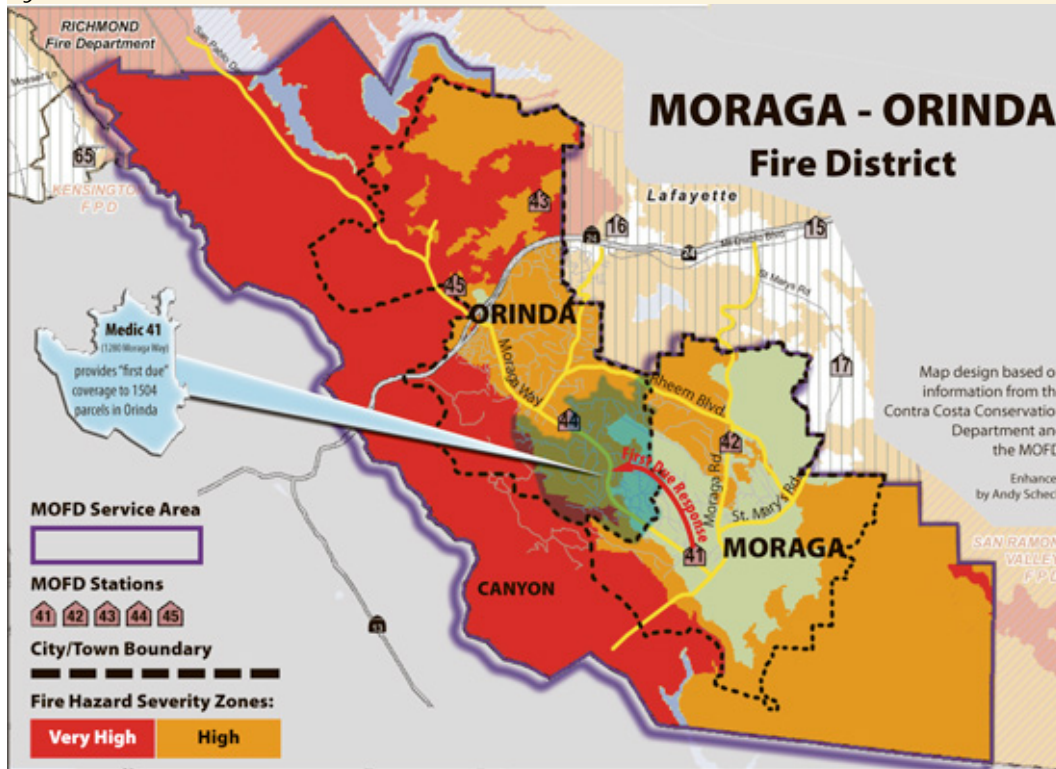
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Published March 4th, 2009

## Moraga, Orinda, and MOFD Meet

### Nowicki Reports Property Tax Allocation on Target

By Andrea A. Firth



Council Members from Moraga and Orinda and members of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Board of Directors recently met to discuss the Fire District's property tax allocation. According to Orinda's Revenue Enhancement Task Force (RETF), currently Moraga contributes 35% of the MOFD property tax revenue and Orinda kicks in 65%. Fire Chief Pete Nowicki reported that the property tax revenues that Moraga and Orinda contribute to fund the Fire District are allocated fairly and reflect the level of services received by each municipality. Nowicki emphasized that the MOFD responded and functioned as a single fire district and that quantifying service on a per parcel basis was not possible. However when pressed, he provided examples of infrastructure expenditures and service coverage that supported his position that Moraga and Orinda each pay for and receive their fair share.

The tri-agency meeting was prompted by the recommendations of the RETF which has proposed capping the MOFD's property tax revenues at 4.5% with plans to commit the excess tax revenues toward Orinda's much needed infrastructure repairs.

"I am very pleased to see you all here," stated Art Haigh, Chair of Orinda's Citizen's Infrastructure Oversight Committee and a member of the RETF. "It is my fervent desire to address Orinda's rapidly deteriorating infrastructure," he added. Haigh stated that the RETF had identified the need to explore two issues: the

funding inequity between Moraga and Orinda and the high cost of the MOFD services as compared to other districts. This two-hour meeting was only able to tackle the first issue posed by the RETF.

Approximately 30 individuals and a group of ten firefighters attended the meeting. Orinda residents, many of whom commended the three agencies for meeting and initiating a public dialogue, dominated the public comment segment of the meeting. Several members of the RETF strongly encouraged the Council Members to employ an independent consultant to investigate the matter. And a couple of Orindans advocated that City secede from MOFD and form an independent fire district.

Following the public comment, Moraga Mayor Dave Trotter, who chaired the meeting, moved the group quickly through the agenda infusing an occasional humorous quip, which helped to alleviate some of the tension in the room. All eyes were focused on Chief Nowicki as he reviewed the definition and utilization of the fire flow tax, provided a historical perspective of the District's formation, and described the distribution of emergency and fire protection services in detail. Along the way Nowicki responded to a number of questions posed by the Council Members on a variety of issues related to the Fire District.

*Response Zones.* There are two fire stations in Moraga and three located in Orinda. "The apparatus [stationed in] Orinda respond predominantly to households in Orinda. The fire engines and emergency vehicles stationed in Moraga also cover many homes in Orinda," stated Nowicki. "It's important to remember that stations are responsible for covering a 1.5 miles radius around the station," he added. This leads to 20% to 25 % of the Moraga stations providing coverage in Orinda explained Nowicki.

When asked if Orinda could contract with Moraga to obtain that "25% coverage," Nowicki replied, "That just makes bad bed fellows. It's not good business." He expanded on this comment noting that surrounding districts routinely provide coverage through a reciprocal agreement. "We responded into Lafayette 98 times last year. We know we need to back them up," he stated. In return, Lafayette regularly responds to calls that emanate from Saint Mary's College in Moraga.

*Fire Flow Tax.* Moraga and Orinda merged to form one fire district almost 12 years ago. At that time, Moraga had a fire flow tax in place and Orindans voted to establish this special tax to assist with providing funds for fire protection and emergency service equipment and water distribution facilities. The tax is applied by parcel and calculated by multiplying the tax rate (currently 6 cents per parcel)-established annually by the Fire District Board-by a fire risk flow factor (based on factors such as square footage and the inclusion of a sprinkler system). The average Orinda/Moraga home carries a fire flow tax of about \$80 to \$100 per year.

*Water Pipes.* An element of Orinda's infrastructure problem is the status of the City's water pipes that are old, small in size, and often corroded further narrowing the water flow. It is EBMUD's responsibility to repair broken water lines at which time pipes are upgraded to the more optimal unobstructed six-inch pipe. However, the party responsible to replace the many old and intact water pipes that deliver suboptimal amounts of water and pressure is less clear. Nowicki explained that the fire flow tax is not specific to addressing water flow and water pipe systems, and the Board's policy has been to apply the tax dollars to equipment and facilities and not personnel. "We feel that the MOFD should be a part of getting the water pipes upgraded, but we will not be able to address this issue for half a decade," stated MOFD Board Member John Wyro.

*High Severity and Unincorporated Areas.* There is a larger amount of high fire hazard severity area in Orinda as compared to Moraga, according to Nowicki. These areas require wild land apparatus and training. Nowicki also augments staffing capabilities at high-risk times in these high-severity zones. The Chief also described the District's boundaries, which include Canyon and unincorporated parts of Moraga.

*Other Differences.* Nowicki explained that when the MOFD was formed, Orinda had significant infrastructure needs. There were no paramedic resources, two stations needed to be razed and rebuilt, the equipment was old, and training was needed. "Almost all of the infrastructure needs have been met in Orinda," stated Nowicki, noting that it has taken time to make up the inequities that were inherited with the merger. He also stated that it is easier for the Fire District to respond in Moraga due to the wider and newer roads, and that Orinda placed more calls for emergency and fire service than Moraga. Nowicki reiterated that the MOFD responds to the needs of Orinda and Moraga as a single and unified District.

The Tri-Agency Committee will meet again on Thursday, March 26th at 7 p.m. in the Orinda Library Auditorium to continue their discussions.

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