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Louder Retirement Should Not Unhinge Joint Venture

Fire chiefs say MOFD/ConFire station consolidation plan stays on course

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District closed Lafayette's fire station 16 in January. This month ConFire chief Daryl Louder announced his retirement-raising fears that these events will compound the uncertainty of providing fire and emergency services to Lafayette, including concerns over a proposed inter-agency fire station consolidation plan.

Louder approached the Moraga-Orinda Fire District in January with a proposal for a joint venture: combine his shuttered station 16 with MOFD's station 43, which was scheduled for renovation. The resultant station 46 partnership is expected to save each district an estimated \$1 million annually in operating costs. The proposed site for the new station is along El Nido Ranch Road in Lafayette, near the Orinda border.

Louder will stay in the job until the end of October. "There are a number of strategic issues I plan to work on during my remaining time with the district," he said. "Obviously, the joint fire station initiative is centric to Lafayette." "I do not see the chief's departure having an effect on Lafayette," said Contra Costa County Supervisor Candace Andersen, who was upbeat about the prospects of the consolidation. "The MOFD/ConFire talks are moving along quickly, and I know that Louder is committed to working diligently to see if we can make this joint station happen," she said.

MOFD Fire Chief Randall Bradley concurred. "We are very close to an agreement that we can bring to our boards," he said. "Louder's departure should not impact the discussions and our ability to finalize an agreement."

Not everybody exuded the same confidence. Vince Wells, president of United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County Local 1230, was not sure how Louder's retirement will impact the consolidation proposal. "He is the biggest proponent of this plan from the ConFire side," said Wells. "His leaving will certainly impact his credibility and ability to convince the board of supervisors that the merger is a good deal when he will not be around to see the deal through. It leaves us without a fire chief at a very critical time."

Lafayette resident George Burttt also bemoaned the timing of Louder's exit. "To make painful decisions, and then leave, is tough. If he could have stayed, we'd be better off, because he would have been here to implement the changes." Burttt praised Louder for at least trying to do something positive. "Louder's going to get the blame for a lot of things, but I'll give him credit for coming to Bradley with the consolidation idea," he said.

Notwithstanding the question marks, the consolidation effort remains on track, and Louder is committed to seeing the plan through. "We have been meeting with county counsel and MOFD on a proposal we can present to the board of supervisors. I'm hoping that we can have something to present by late April," he said.

As to the plan for finding Louder's successor, Andersen said she was appreciative that Louder gave the board over six months notice that he would be leaving. "This gives us the opportunity to search for and find a replacement who will be up to the task of leading a fire agency with severe economic challenges, and who is open to innovative solutions to meet the fire and emergency medical response needs of our community," she said.

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