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Firefighters' Union Not Happy

By Nick Marnell

Frustration is increasing and morale is deteriorating inside the fire stations of both the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Prevention District. ConFire is closing stations and laying off personnel; firefighters are leaving for a district in bankruptcy. The MOFD firefighters have worked without a contract since 2010; they've not received a pay raise in five years. And the firefighters say they now face cynicism from a captious public over many of their actions.

"Everybody is questioning 'how many fires do you go on? How many firefighters do you need? Why are you using such a big engine?'" said Vince Wells, president of Local 1230 of the United Firefighters of Contra Costa County, which represents the firefighters of both districts.

After 2007, said Wells, the districts' property tax revenue collapsed, public sector pensions became an issue and the citizens' grumbling escalated. "It's always about money and pensions," he said. "I just lost all of mine; why do you get to keep yours?" But Wells stressed that when public employees are hired, they do not go into the job with the attitude that they're going to get rich; the one thing that they are guaranteed is a pension.

"We trade opportunity for security," explained Mark DeWeese, Local 1230 MOFD representative.

Wells emphasized that the reason there are financial issues in the fire districts is not because the firefighters are demanding more money; it is because of the property tax revenue shortfall.

"If they put two people on engines and kept the same revenue, I could get paid more," said Wells, a ConFire captain. "We're fighting for staffing and better equipment. We want more people on the staff for safety reasons. If it was about money, I'd drive the engine by myself!"

Despite their unhappiness with labor conditions, Section 1962 of the California Labor Code prohibits firefighters from going on strike. "We have very limited options," said DeWeese, speaking for the rank and file. He sounded discouraged with the slow progress of the labor negotiations. "Two things MOFD wanted, which (Fire Chief) Randy Bradley stated publicly: health care costs frozen and pension reform. They got the pension reform from Jerry Brown; our health care costs are frozen," he said. "The ones who run the fire department have better benefits than the firefighters," added Wells.

The union president maintained that the firefighters' morale at MOFD is just as bad as at ConFire, though ConFire has recently received far more negative press. "ConFire has a financial problem," he said. "MOFD has a public perception problem."

For example, at ConFire, the younger firefighters are looking to leave, further damaging an already depleted staff. "We hired five guys from Stockton; they are leaving us to go back to Stockton, a city still in bankruptcy!" said Wells. He explained that even if the district was handed \$15 million to beef up the staffing, it would take years to hire the proper number of firefighters, partly due to procedural regulations. "It'll take years for ConFire to recover," said Wells. "And I fault the board of supervisors."

In defense of the perception of the district, DeWeese explained that the MOFD should be among the highest paid group of firefighters because they work in a high-end community where the value of the property they protect is much higher. "The district has its own ambulances, and the firefighters perform advanced medical procedures," he said. "That's the service the people want, and they are willing to tax themselves to pay for it."

As to the talk of MOFD and Lafayette joining forces, Wells again appeared frustrated. If Lafayette joins the MOFD, he said, Lamorinda Fire District firefighters will be helping ConFire by responding to calls in Walnut Creek and Concord, putting the firefighters at greater risk because they would be working harder. "All of the pain happens at our level," he said.

Both Wells and DeWeese indicated that a more aggressive stance in dealing with public officials is forthcoming from the union.

"I don't want to see firefighters get angry with the public," said Wells. "We've always been able to direct our anger at the public officials, and that's the way it should stay."

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