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Orindans Speak Out Against MOFD-ConFire Plan

By Nick Marnell

At a March 20 public workshop, Orinda residents lambasted the Moraga-Orinda Fire District's proposal to merge its fire station 43 with Contra Costa County Fire Protection District station 16. In addition, a second MOFD board member and the firefighters' union withdrew their support for the consolidation plan.

Fire Chief Randall Bradley outlined the plan to an involved Orinda audience, focusing on the location of the new combined station, the financial benefits to the district and the consequent service level impacts. He also cited major concerns about the partnership, including the ability of ConFire to uphold its end of the bargain through the county's uncertain financial times, and the fact that the union has backed off its support of the merger.

In a phone interview Vince Wells, president of United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County Local 1230, explained the union's position. "The plan is far too much in favor of the MOFD, and it is not fair to the ConFire employees and the communities they serve," he said. Wells, who represents firefighters in both ConFire and MOFD, does not think it is right that the new station will be paid for in part by ConFire but will be staffed exclusively by MOFD employees.

Comments from the Orinda audience were overwhelmingly negative:

"I have concerns for noise and for my privacy."

"Why not just rebuild 43 right where it is? Serve Orinda!"

"I have no confidence in ConFire."

"Too many unanswered questions. This is crazy. You're playing with fire!"

"What we have, works! I see how this works well for Lafayette. I don't see how this works for us!"

Only one of the more than 20 public comments was favorable to the proposal. "The minimal service impact for a \$60 million savings is worth it," said Orinda resident Steve Cohn, referring to the 30-year projected operational savings to both fire districts that may result from the merger.

The board members' opinions were mixed. Directors Alex Evans and Steve Anderson spoke in favor of the merger, because they believe that the cost savings will sustain the long-term viability of MOFD. Board vice president John Wyro wished to continue dialogue with ConFire, but he expressed concern over its financial stability. Frank Sperling, board president, again refused to support the consolidation. And director Fred Weil, who was previously in favor of the idea, delivered an eloquent speech on the failings of the proposed merger.

"My decision is 'No'," he said. "Let's get on with our own business, and stop this discussion tonight."

The audience cheered after Weil's presentation.

Despite time and public pressure bearing down on the district, the board voted 3-2 to continue the negotiations with ConFire. A special board meeting was scheduled for March 26, after our press deadline, to decide whether to approve a \$15,000 non-refundable deposit to the seller of the property on which MOFD plans to build the new fire station- read the related article, "Planning Commission Looks at Shared Fire Station" on page A2, and check our website for updates, www.lamorindaweekly.com.

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