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Red Cloud Rising MOFD grapples with deficit

By Nick Marnell

Two radical changes to policy were discussed at the June 5 meeting of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors. Because of a larger than expected operating loss for the current year and a forecast deficit of over $1 million for fiscal year 2013-14, service cutbacks and an increase in the fire flow tax rate were offered as potential solutions to offset the back-to-back years of red ink.

MOFD Fire Chief Randall Bradley presented the board a preliminary draft of the 2013-14 fiscal year budget, which included a forecast of a $600,000 increase in property tax revenue. However an increased payment to fund the employees' retirement account, and the debt service on the district's pension obligation bond, swallowed up nearly the entire revenue gain. Coupled with a projected loss for the current year of over $1.2 million - $400,000 more than originally forecast, partly due to a surprise prior year adjustment to property tax revenue - the district will grapple with over $2 million in losses for this fiscal year and next.

"The only way I can bring the board a balanced budget for this year is through service reductions," said Bradley.

Discussion ensued over the potential reductions, specifically, the additional cross-staffing of MOFD ambulances.

MOFD deploys three ambulances: Medic 141 at station 41 on Moraga Way in Moraga, Medic 144 at station 44 on Orchard just off Moraga Way in Orinda, and Medic 145 at station 45 in Orinda Village. Stations 41 and 45 currently have a three-person engine company and a two-person ambulance crew on duty at all times. Station 44 is assigned only a three-person engine company; it operates either Medic 144 or the engine, depending on the nature of the emergency.

The district refers to the personnel structure at station 44 as "cross-staffing."

If the district were to instead cross-staff Medic 141 and Medic 145, and assign a full-time, two-person crew to the ambulance at station 44, it would eliminate two full-time positions.

"Our service model is based upon expectations," cautioned Bradley. "There would be a public outcry." Moraga resident Dick Olsen also advised the board against such a policy decision. "Chief Johnston brought this same proposal up 12 years ago and he was nearly tarred and feathered," he said.

"We don't support any service level reductions, and hope that the board doesn't change its policy on that," said Vince Wells, president of Local 1230 United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County.

Other cost-saving ideas were presented. Mark DeWeese, MOFD union representative, pointed out that $2.5 million could be recovered from the capital budget if the district halted the scheduled improvements to stations 43 and 41.

The board also discussed the possibility of raising the district's fire flow tax rate, which is currently at 6 cents per fire risk unit. (A fire risk unit on an improved parcel is a figure calculated according to a formula based in part on the building construction, its square footage and whether it contains an approved sprinkler system.) The rate is capped at 6 cents in Orinda; Moraga's rate may increase to 30 cents with a vote by the board of directors. A 1-cent increase in Moraga's fire flow tax rate equates to nearly a $90,000 annual revenue increase for the district.

The budget discussion will continue at a special June 20 meeting. The board will also revisit the station 46 debate. "Director Steve Anderson requested that the Station 46 item be reconsidered, so I will be putting it on the agenda for the meeting," said Bradley.

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