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## Into the Fire

*By Nick Marnell*

You may never guess that Stephen Healy was appointed interim fire chief of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District July 16. He hasn't ordered a fire chief badge. He has not requested a new personal vehicle. He hasn't remodeled the chief's office; in fact, he still drops into his old office at station 45 in Orinda Village.

Even if he wanted to enjoy any of those perks, he has not had the time.

"My first week, I put in 78 hours," said Healy. It was a manifestation of the biggest adjustment Healy has had to make in his new position: "Time management has been my top challenge so far," he said.

The Alamo resident, with a master's degree in emergency services administration from Cal State Long Beach, has served in the fire industry for 27 years, including the past six as battalion chief, interim fire marshal and division chief with MOFD. Healy, 46, is also an incident commander for the East Bay Incident Management Team, and he works with the Federal Emergency Management Agency on its Urban Search and Rescue Task Force. He said that this operational experience, plus his knowledge of district personnel and external stakeholders, make him a strong candidate for the permanent job.

MOFD has used outside consultants to help find its past three fire chiefs. Healy agrees with that strategy if the district intends to hire an experienced chief. "But the downside is the (outside) candidate's lack of knowledge of district culture, and the length of time required to understand the issues that are important in the district," he said.

The new chief will be thrust into the most polarizing issue of the year in the district: the proposed fire station 46 consolidation. MOFD recently closed on a parcel at the Orinda-Lafayette border to be used for the construction of that station, to replace its station 43 and the closed station 16 of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. A partner must next be secured, and two candidates are in the mix: ConFire and the city of Lafayette. Healy talked about the advantages of each one.

"If we partner with ConFire, there would be no LAFCO issues, and no hurt feelings," said the interim chief. But a partnership with the city of Lafayette would require approval of the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission, since the city would first have to secede from ConFire. "With Lafayette, there could be more money available to the district, with more options, and economies of scale," he said.

Other major areas of focus for Healy will be the finalization of the 2013-14 district budget and the resumption of contract talks with the local firefighters' union.

There are many motivations for accepting an interim position. Employees may take an interim title to not disappoint a supervisor who recommended them. Sometimes an employee may accept the position as a temporary fix, as a favor to a governing board. Often, the staff will pressure its manager to step in to the top job. In many of these cases, the interim manager does not even want the responsibility.

When asked if he indeed wants the permanent fire chief position, Healy did not hesitate with his response. "Yes, I do," he said.

The district spent \$17,000 with executive search firm Avery and Associates in 2009 to recruit fire Chief Randall Bradley. Contra Costa County contracted with Alliance Resource Consulting LLC for \$25,000 to find the new ConFire chief.

With a successful audition as interim fire chief, Healy may have the opportunity to save MOFD that expense in 2013.

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[back](#)

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