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One Thousand Dollars A Page

By Nick Marnell

One year ago the Board of Supervisors commissioned Fitch and Associates, a Missouri-based fire consulting company, to determine optimal fire and emergency medical service response within the struggling Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. Frustrated residents and equally frustrated politicians provided feedback on the final draft of the company's report at a public meeting Jan. 22.

Fitch consultant Jim Broman outlined ConFire's structural deficit, caused by expenses exceeding revenue coupled with a dependency on reserve funds since 2009. The report showed that even based on positive financial forecasts, the district will survive through only fiscal year 2016-17, after which its reserves will have been depleted. It was pointed out in the public comments portion of the meeting, however, that the basis upon which those forecasts were made - a 5 percent annual growth in revenue and 1 percent growth in expenses - seemed unrealistic.

But Fitch's task was to determine what could be done with the hand that ConFire has been dealt. The study recommended that the district take two, three-person, engine companies out of service and convert them to three, two-person, Quick Response Vehicle companies. The district imple-

mented a QVR pilot program in the fall, to handle low-level EMS calls in a smaller, more flexible vehicle, allowing the fire engines to respond to larger emergencies. The report said that this change will allow ConFire to survive over the next three years under the current revenue structure, with no layoffs and even the possibility of opening some of the closed stations.

"Our work was to show you how to manage through the next two to three years, when there will be a need for a tax initiative," said Broman.

"For this, we paid a thousand dollars a page?" said Bill Granados, Lafayette's fire commissioner, referring to the \$170,000 cost of the 150-page document. He said he was frustrated with the lack of ideas for revenue generation and he was vehemently opposed to Fitch's staffing recommendation.

District 2 Supervisor Candace Andersen disputed the \$150,000 that Fitch claimed was the price to purchase a QRV; it was nearly triple what her research showed to be the case. A Fitch consultant responded that the vehicles would have additional limited firefighting duty, and the cost estimate included the upgrades necessary to do that.


The report suggested that fire response times could be reduced

by up to two minutes, blaming the performance on a cumbersome dispatch process and the slow turnout of fire crews from the stations. Andersen asked for assurance from fire chief Jeff Carman that he planned to improve those numbers.

"We are taking a fresh look at all of our operations," said Carman. "There are definitely some efficiencies that we can gain." That includes resolving why fire responses take longer than EMS responses, he said. "You'd think that a fire response would be faster," said Andersen.

Supervisor Mary Piepho reflected both the praise and caution expressed by the board over the study. "This report is a tremendous starting point," she said. "But we have a lot of work to do."

The final version of the Fitch Report will be presented to the supervisors on Feb. 25.



Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meetings:
Wednesday, Feb. 5
Wednesday, Feb 19
check website for updates
(Go to www.mofd.org as the meeting date approaches for location and more information)

Lamorinda Fire News Briefs

By Nick Marnell

MOFD Cuts Back Public Meetings

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District board voted unanimously Jan. 15 to conduct public meetings once a month starting in March, rather than twice monthly as had been the standard.

"While we have some heavy topics we are working on, monthly meetings should be sufficient for the normal work load," said John Wyro, board president. Director Fred Weil suggested that two special meetings be added to the monthly schedule: one in June, to approve a preliminary budget, and the other in September, to approve the final budget. The motion passed unanimously. Surrounding fire districts of Albany, Rodeo-Hercules, San Ramon and East Contra Costa County schedule board meetings once a month. The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District board met nine times in 2013.

Evans Asks to Not be Nominated

Each year, in January, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board elects new officers as well as standing and ad hoc committee members. What usually happens is that the vice president is elected to the presidency, assuring a five-year rotation in the top slot among the directors. The Jan. 15 election came with a twist.

Board vice president Alex Evans is a founding partner and president of EMC Research, a firm that specializes in polling and public opinion research. Expecting a surge in business that would clash with his MOFD obligations, Evans asked that he be pulled out of the running for the board presidency. "The even numbered years are the busy times in my work cycle," he said, on a conference call from Hawaii. "I respectfully ask that I not be nominated." A motion was presented to have John Wyro continue as president through 2014 and for the other directors to retain their titles as well. Only director Fred Weil disapproved. He maintained that the proper order of succession was to elect Steve Anderson, board secretary, as president. "Shuffling this around sets a bad precedent," he said.

The motion passed 4-0, with Weil abstaining.

Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force

With neither Lamorinda fire agency able to come up with the estimated \$6 million to build a fire station to replace Lafayette's closed station 16, the city looked into the possibility of funding the replacement station 46 itself. But the Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force report Jan. 21 was not encouraging.

Steven Falk, city manager, pointed out the fiscal reality. "The city does not have the funds to help purchase a fire station," he said. "No way can I recommend loaning money out of the city's reserve. The city council would not vote for it anyway."

Task force member Dennis Garrison acknowledged that a new station will benefit the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District and the city. "Would you invest \$6 million to save \$2 million annually? Of course you would," he said. "But, none of us has the \$6 million."

Co-chair Traci Reilly said that the task force will present an update on securing alternate fire and emergency funding for the city, and seek further direction, at the Feb. 10 City Council meeting.

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