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Frustration at Every Turn

By Nick Marnell

At a Feb. 5 special board meeting, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District approved a mid-year budget revision that revealed more bad news. Administrative services director Gloriann Sasser projected that the district will now lose \$599,000 in fiscal year 2013-14, nearly \$200,000 more than budgeted. Though property tax revenue increased more than \$300,000, ambulance revenue dropped nearly the same amount and overtime charges rose nearly \$250,000, she said.

Sasser then made an even more sobering announcement to the board: MOFD's long range financial plan projects losses through 2018-19, with its capital fund depleted two years sooner. "In order to eliminate the structural deficit in the general fund, additional expenditure reductions are

necessary," she said.

Her presentation did not go over well with the firefighters' union.

"If we take a 9.5 percent pay cut, where will that money be used?" asked Vince Wells, Local 1230 president. "You took the SAFER grant money, but you then cut the staff. And how serious are you about making cuts? This administration is top heavy!"

"That is your opinion. I am not prepared to acknowledge it as anything more," said director Fred Weil.

Wells continued, stating that the firefighters have done what they could to help the district climb out of its financial mess: no raises in six years; health care contributions frozen since 2010; and quickly agreeing to recent staffing reductions. Unswayed, the board unanimously

passed a motion that authorized Sasser to further cut costs and present a balanced budget for the next fiscal year.

Weil softened his stance somewhat to the firefighters in attendance. "I am as frustrated as you are that we have to deal with these realities," he said.

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings

Next meetings:

Wednesday, Feb. 19
Wednesday, March 19
check website for updates

(Go to www.mofd.org as the meeting date approaches for location and more information)

After Impasse, What's Next?

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Once the panel's findings are released, the district may impose its last, best and final offer after holding a public hearing on the impasse.

As one-sided as this process appears - the district may impose but the union cannot strike - MOFD does risk backlash if the findings of the panel are strongly negative toward the district. Political and public pressure could hinder the implementation of the district's last, best and final offer; however, the district would still have the right to do so.

The MOFD board of directors and fire chief Stephen Healy did not respond to questions posed for this article. "While the district hoped the parties would be able to reach agreement and avoid impasse, the district's financial challenges necessitated this action," the district said in a press release.

The union did not hide its frustration. DeWeese and Local 1230 president Vince Wells both noted that the rank and file have received no cost of living raises since 2008, and the firefighters have been saddled with 100 percent of their health care premium increases for the last three years. Wells said that he objected to the district's attempts to correct its financial mistakes on the backs of the firefighters; he pointed to "frivolous spending on ideas that were not well thought out," and an accounting error that reduced the district's general fund balance by \$2 million. DeWeese added that the union has agreed to eliminate two of its top three highest paid positions, and also agreed to give up six engineer slots, all to help save money for the district.

"The Moraga-Orinda Fire District was the last place we felt we would

end up in this situation," said Wells.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric and the positioning, both parties have promised to deliver at all times the high level of professional service that district residents have come to expect.

MOFD Jan. 28 Last, Best and Final Offer to IAFF/Local 1230 - Highlights

Term: through June 30, 2016, OR, through June 30, 2015 if parties cannot agree on a multi-year deal.
 Salary: 7.5 percent decrease effective July 1 through June 2016, OR, a 9.5 percent decrease for one year effective July 1.
 Health benefits: up to \$1,197 per month maximum, for the Kaiser Family Plan (no increase). Up to \$458 per month for a single employee and \$916 per month for two.
 Retiree health benefits: vesting schedule for current employees. New employees (hired after implementation of the offer) to receive the Public Employees Medical and Hospital Care Act minimum, which in 2014 is \$119 per month.
 Staffing: the ability for the district to implement staffing changes under more flexible terms, and the creation of 12 "single-role" paramedic positions to replace departing or retiring firefighter-paramedics.

The Union's Counter-Offer

Term: two year extension of current agreement
 Salary: no salary increase
 Health benefits: no increase to the district's medical contribution
 No other changes to the current contract terms
 (Pension rates are not a negotiable item. The nine firefighters hired after Jan. 1, 2013 fall under the retirement plan of the Public Employees' Pension Reform Act.)

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