



**Independent, locally owned and operated!**

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published February 25th, 2015

## Non-Competitive Compensation Package Plagues MOFD Recruiting Efforts

*By Nick Marnell*

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District is struggling to recruit and retain qualified firefighter-paramedics, and both management and the rank and file have expressed concern that increasing staffing to handle this year's fire season will be a challenge.

Moraga and Orinda are two of the gold standard communities in Contra Costa County. The 35,000 residents, whose median home value exceeds \$1.2 million and who earn some of the highest incomes in the Bay Area, allocate over 20 percent of their property taxes to their fire district, helping provide it with annual revenue of more than \$18 million. The revenue funds the operation of five fire stations, above the National Fire Protection Agency 2013 fire department survey average of 3.3 stations for districts the size of MOFD. The residents have paid for this enhanced level of service since the district's 1997 inception.

Despite serving such wealthy communities, MOFD firefighters do not keep pace financially with their peers. "They are one of the lowest paid and they have the worst health and retirement benefit package of the paid firefighters in the county," said Vince Wells, president of firefighters union Local 1230.

The plight of the MOFD firefighters evokes little sympathy from many, who cite the firefighters' high average salaries and benefits; 36 MOFD firefighters earned total compensation of over \$200,000 in 2014. But firefighters have recently departed the district for more lucrative deals, potentially leaving MOFD as a veritable training ground and feeder system - likely not the scenario that residents envisioned 18 years ago. "It's a valid concern," said Fire Chief Stephen Healy. "It's a challenge for us because we compete in a regional job market, and other agencies offer better benefits than we do."

To aid in employee recruitment and retention, the district recently increased its health care premium contribution for firefighters. But its contribution for retiree medical insurance for new hires remains at the California Public Employees' Retirement System minimum, compared with the contribution of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, which pays the same amount in health care premiums for its retirees as it does for its active members. Most of the MOFD firefighters also pay a 9 percent subvention of the employer share of the district's pension contribution, while ConFire negotiated out the employee subvention in its latest contract. "No doubt, the ConFire deal added pressure to our district," said Healy.

The district employs 51 firefighters to cover its basic 51 weekly shifts, and to cover the shifts missed by those on vacation, sick, on disability or on a strike team. Last year MOFD increased its daily staffing from 17 to 19 firefighters during the height of the fire season. "We are concerned the district does not have the capacity to go to 19 this summer," said Mark DeWeese, MOFD union representative.

Healy agreed that increasing the staffing for fire season will be a challenge, but he said that MOFD has the capacity to staff at 19 by using overtime. Overtime is a fact of firefighting life, and paying overtime is less expensive than hiring additional firefighters. But it can exact a high human toll. Last year, as ConFire coped with its own overtime crisis, Wells said, "... I get concerned when overtime is so excessive that the firefighters don't want to work it and you're forcing them to." As provided in the latest labor contract, MOFD has the right to hire single role paramedics to fill current vacancies. Either the district or the union can request other adjustments. "You can always renegotiate a contract," said district union representative Anthony Perry - like eliminating the firefighters' subvention of district pension costs or increasing the amount of the district contribution to cover retiree health care. "Those would be public policy decisions for the board to make," said Healy.

"Maintaining competitive wages and benefits for our employees is important to the district," said

Alex Evans, MOFD board president, who would not elaborate.

The chief said that he does not expect the size of the current staff to impede district firefighting efforts. "We'll be looking at this every day through the summer, and it will have some impact on our ability to provide statewide mutual aid. But our first duty is to protect our own citizens."

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA