

Published July 26th, 2017 Morale plummeting at MOFD due to board actions By Nick Marnell



Capt. Mark McCullah shares his frustrations with MOFD board. Photo Nick Marnell

Intent on putting the district on the road to financial viability, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board voted to slash district operations, with one director telling a room full of firefighters that everything was in play for future cuts, including the closure of a fire station.

Fire Chief Stephen Healy presented a revised 2017-18 MOFD budget to the board July 18 that eliminated \$500,000 in operational expenses, including overtime, but even those cuts did not totally satisfy Director John Jex.

"Our general reserve is grossly inadequate, and will be at the end of this year, even with this," Jex said, stressing that MOFD is not in good enough financial shape to operate long term and to meet its obligations. With the budget changes, the district projects its general fund reserve to reach \$4.8 million this fiscal year, though as of 2016 MOFD recognizes more than \$64 million in net

pension liability, a pension obligation bond and retiree health care liability.

"You need to increase revenue, or make operational changes like eliminating a fire house," Jex said. "You have to make those kinds of determinations."

Director Steve Anderson pleaded for the board to keep the district on track with its mission to provide the highest possible level of emergency and public service to the community. "In the last 60 days, we are at the lowest morale that I have seen in this organization. These people have lost their leader and they have no confidence in their board," Anderson said, referring to Healy's announced September departure and urging passage of the original budget. "There is a toxic environment going on here, and we've got to fix the morale now."

Three directors remained unmoved, as Jex, Craig Jorgens and Brad Barber voted to pass the revised budget, with \$100,000 added back for the chief to use for contingencies. Anderson and board President Kathleen Famulener voted against the cuts.

Firefighter-paramedic Lucas Lambert, district union representative, lashed out at the board's decision to reduce operating expenses. "The MOFD board of directors has created an unnecessarily chaotic environment at our meetings. This type of chaos is not conducive to the high level of service that we aim to provide and the professional environment we pride ourselves on," Lambert said, urging the public to pay close attention and not stand for service cuts in the community.

Local 1230 President Vince Wells said he understands the need for MOFD to be financially responsible, especially with the district history of financial mismanagement, but he said there needs to be a proper balance between financial restraint and providing adequate service. "A couple of new board members have financial backgrounds, and are putting financial stability ahead of fire service, and that has the troops concerned," Wells said.

Wells also talked about the soon-to-begin 2018 labor negotiations. "I'm concerned," Wells said. "Because of the actions this board has taken so far, we expect it will push for reduced resources. With this group, it seems everything is on the table, and that makes everyone uneasy."

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