



Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire

District Board of Directors
Wednesday, Feb. 7, 7 p.m.
Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors

Tuesday, Feb. 13, 1:30 p.m.
Board Chamber room 107,
Administration Building,
651 Pine St., Martinez
For meeting times and agendas,
visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

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Firefighters: North Bay fire could happen in Orinda

By Nick Marnell



A police officer looks on as firefighters sift through the rubble of his destroyed North Bay home. Photo provided

A team from the Moraga-Orinda Fire District responded to the Tubbs Fire in the North Bay in October, but what struck the firefighters about the incident was not only the amount of devastation but the parallel to their own district's topography and demographics.

With the perfect storm alignment of high temperatures, high winds and low humidity, and a Red Flag warning issued by the National Weather Service, MOFD prepared for heightened activity Oct 8. "Of 14 calls that day on Engine 145, only one was a medical emergency," said Capt. Mike Lacy.

Near midnight, crews responded to a 2-acre fire near the Lafayette Reservoir. One hour later, a small vegetation fire ignited along

Monterey Terrace in Orinda. A 5-acre vegetation fire atop Tilden Park, near the golf course, erupted around 2:30 a.m. and took three hours to contain.

Early in the afternoon of Oct. 9 came the state mutual aid request to the North Bay and the raging Tubbs Fire. MOFD personnel joined a strike team from Santa Clara, arrived at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds and were assigned to the Fountaingrove and Wallace Road neighborhoods of Santa Rosa.

It was too late for fire suppression. "Where could we make the most impact in an area that was not burning?" Lacy said was the goal of the responders. "We tried to do more than just fight fire. We tried to restore a new normal for the peo-

ple."

The crew sorted through ashes looking for a wedding ring. Firefighters saved a baby calf and fed cows for a rancher. A police officer returned to his destroyed home, and firefighters sifted through the rubble to find his safe – a large, expensive safe, expected to survive anything. But nothing inside survived. The officer's guns and all of his paperwork were gone. "Complete and utter destruction, within the indestructible," Lacy said. "The fire showed no concern for anybody."

Twenty-two died and 5,500 structures were lost, including more than 4,600 homes, in the most destructive wildfire in California history. "It took everything in its way, including large shopping

complexes. And a fire station," Lacy said.

Though the MOFD personnel worked 72 consecutive hours upon arrival and then 24 on, 24 off for 12 days, Lacy said the fire was more emotionally draining than physically.

"The community interacted with us so closely," Lacy said. "Can you see if my kid's shoes made it? But we knew the shoes didn't make it. Nothing made it. There was nothing our team could do to stop this fire. It was bigger than all of us."

Lacy explained that being defeated by a fire is contrary to everything that firefighters stand for. "We do everything that we can, and it still beats us? That impact is heavy. It stays with us for a long time."

The Tubbs Fire destroyed 57.5 square miles and more than 36,000 acres; MOFD covers 63.5 square miles and more than 40,000 acres. Lacy said that the Fountaingrove neighborhood reminded him of Wilder, and the Wallace Road area reminded him of Orinda Downs, with an even higher vegetation density in Orinda than in the North Bay.

The district benefitted from the exposure, the experience and the training, Lacy told the MOFD board Jan. 17, and the knowledge attained from working the Tubbs Fire will enhance community risk reduction.

Lacy closed with an ominous admonition. "This fire has a very real potential to occur in our district," he said.

Lafayette delay equals Walnut Creek gain

By Nick Marnell

Because of delays in the completion of Lafayette Fire Station 16, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District plans to shift the nine positions it had budgeted for Lafayette to staff an additional engine company in Walnut Creek at Fire Station 1. The Walnut Creek engine company was destaffed in 2011 amidst budget cuts due to the Great Recession.

The reopening of Station 16 was originally scheduled for this March, but the construction will not be completed until March 2019. The staffing for the rebuilt station was to have come from Academy 51, comprising 25 recruits who are

scheduled to graduate Feb. 23.

"So now, the Academy will staff an additional company at Station 1 in Walnut Creek," Fire Chief Jeff Carman told his board Jan. 16. A ConFire engine company consists of a captain, engineer and a firefighter, one of whom must be a licensed paramedic. The nine positions cover three rotating shifts. The nine additional personnel for Station 1 will come from within the ConFire ranks, via promotions or reassignments; the 25 recruits will become probationary firefighters assigned to regular companies throughout the district.

The chief said he uses 10 daily

calls as a benchmark for the addition of an engine company and according to the latest published district records, Station 1 responded to 10.23 calls per day in October.

Carman warned the board that the additional staffing at Walnut Creek would put pressure on next year's district budget. The estimated cost of the additional staffing is \$688,000 for the four remaining months of this fiscal year and \$2.1 million for 2018-19. But the chief added that, should finances preclude the addition of personnel in 2019, the engine company will move from Walnut Creek to Lafayette Station 16 once it opens.

The addition of the engine company will increase the fire and emergency medical response capacity for Walnut Creek and the surrounding cities and communities, including Lafayette. According to Assistant Fire Chief Ed Gonzales, Fire Station 1 provides coverage into the Lafayette area when stations 15 and 17 are on calls. ConFire Station 3 on Rossmoor Parkway also provides backup coverage into Lafayette, as do Moraga-Orinda Fire District stations 43 and 42.

The district expects to staff the additional Walnut Creek company by mid-March.

ConFire recruits practice rooftop ventilation and fire rescue



Academy 51 recruits train at Station 16 site.

David Zalutskiy's family emigrated from Ukraine when he was a small boy. "We weren't wealthy, we

didn't have a lot of the things other kids had. At Christmas, the fire department came by and gave our

family gifts. I thought that was so great. It made me want to become a firefighter." David's brother Valen-

Photo Nick Marnell

tin is also an Academy 51 recruit.

After three and a half years serving in the Army, in Afghanistan, Rachel Gregory became an emergency medical technician and felt the calling to the fire service. "My family was very close," Gregory said. "What was better for the family always went ahead of what was better for the individual." Along that same line, Daniel Sarrasin said his desire to serve and protect drove him to become a ConFire recruit. "We all have a servant's heart," Sarrasin said.

"I tore both of my ACLs playing ball," said Claire Watkins, who played basketball at Vanderbilt University and became a recruit at the urging of her fiancée. "My recovery taught me to never give up, to push myself to the limits." Watkins said she feels comfortable

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with the teamwork she sees among the recruits and within the ConFire organization. "And I'll have a great story to tell at the end of my life," she said.

Dave Watson, senior training captain, runs Academy 51. "My supervisors said I needed to start teaching, because ConFire had to fill the brain drain of so many senior people leaving," he said. "I get to take the experience of people who love what they're doing and pass it on to the recruits." And teaching plays a major role in his life. "My mom's a teacher, my wife's a teacher. It all comes naturally, I guess," Watson said.

The neighbors near the fire station needn't have ever worried. Goetsch said that all of the smoke they saw was simulated, like the smoke from a smoke bomb.

Student journalists write about a lot

By John T. Miller

A pair of student journalists at Acalanes High School have opened up a can of, well, worms, with their December issue exposé of after hours drinking in the student parking lot.

The front-page photo of the high school's Blueprint newspaper shows an accumulation of discarded Coors cans in the foreground along with a slew of cigarette butts littering a corner of the lot on a Monday morning.

Juniors Lisi Burciaga and Karen Rosenberg were handed the topic by their journalism teacher Larry Freeman.

"Everyone knew it was going

on, but didn't do anything," said Burciaga. "We knew this as students, but it was unverified."

Rosenberg added, "When we started investigating we thought it was worthy of a story. Writing about it brought awareness to the problem."

According to the two writers, their first concern was with the supposed underage drinking and illicit drug use, but that expanded to the litter being strewn in the parking lot and other issues.

The story came out on the day before Winter Break and caused a widescale flurry on social media, especially on Snapchat, where

ephemeral posts disappeared shortly after being viewed.

"Many students called us spoil sports and tattle tales," said Rosenberg. "They felt we were just trying to ruin their good times."

Burciaga was excited that the story brought a lot of attention to the newspaper: "It was cool to see people walking down the hallway reading it."

But while it caused a stir on campus, especially with juniors and seniors, the Blueprint writers hoped to trigger a reaction with local authorities, including the Lafayette police and the City Council. Instead, neither the police nor the

council acknowledged their efforts.

Acalanes Principal Travis Bell thought the students did an excellent job with the story, saying, "It's not the kind of thing you want to read about your school or to see beer cans on the cover of the school newspaper, but they're reporting on what they're seeing. I hope it can spark a collaborate effort to fix the problem."

Bell felt the police were doing good work. "They didn't find underage drinking or any evidence of wrongdoing, but it seems like there could be a curfew enforced."

Working with the local authorities and the District's Technology

and Facilities personnel, Bell is hopeful to find out what the police and the school can and cannot do, and what resources are available, whether it be security cameras, posted signs as to what laws can be upheld, or any other solution.

While Burciaga and Rosenberg have drawn praise for the impact of their article, they have not received any reply from the Lafayette Police and the City Council after their attempts to reach them.

Meanwhile the beer cans continue to pile up in the parking lot over the weekends.