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Former MOFD director Steve Anderson has not lost his passion

By Nick Marnell

Always one to willingly speak his mind, Steve Anderson - the district director ousted from the board in the general election - slammed the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board as dysfunctional, may or may not have helped rig its 2019 election of officers and under certain circumstances would again run for a board seat. Anderson spent six years at the district helm, and though disappointed in the outcome, he understands what he could have done better in the election. "You've got to spend money and you need a campaign organization," he said of two strategies he eschewed.

His change of heart during the recent labor contract negotiations, which resulted in a 13 percent wage increase for the rank and file over three years, Anderson feels hurt him politically. "The pay raise went over what I would have given. I was prepared to vote no. But we would have gone into litigation over an unfair labor practice. It would have taken a year and we would have wasted a lot of money. Voting yes was the right thing to do for the future of the district."

Having learned how to organize a more effective campaign, would Anderson run in 2022? "If Danziger chose to run again, I would not. If he doesn't, I would consider it," he said, speaking of Division 3 Director Steven Danziger, to whom he lost.

Anderson thinks highly of the newly elected board members, and he spent time mentoring them before they took office. Anderson neither confirmed nor denied that he explained to the three new directors how to disrupt the MOFD election process and secure the board presidency for newcomer Danziger. "I did mention to them how the order of succession works. But that in order to become an officer, you only need to be a director and get a majority of the votes. That's it. Did a light go off for them? I have no idea," said Anderson, barely hiding a smirk.

Anderson's frustration with the five-member board that he termed dysfunctional may have played a part in his mentoring of the new directors. "Two of the board members see MOFD as a commodity. It's not a commodity. It's a service organization that protects lives and property. Two directors do not understand that," he said. "Hopefully the board will not remain that way."

He ranks his top accomplishment as being part of a board that put MOFD on the path to fiscal sustainability. The hiring of Gloriann Sasser as administrative services director, improving the financial reporting and developing a long-range financial plan he calls the highlights of his tenure.

To that list Anderson adds the hiring of Fire Chief Dave Winnacker, beginning his second year with the district. "We gave him three years to bring MOFD into the 21st century. And he will do it. I have a lot of confidence in him. He didn't come on board to be a babysitter. He understands a mission and what it takes to get it done," Anderson said of the Marine Corps veteran.

Anderson names fire prevention as an example. "The chief has more done in one year than in the five years prior. But fire prevention will always be a problem. Can more be done? Absolutely. Can we reduce the risk to zero? No. I think it's good that they're looking at it, but there are no easy answers."

As for the talk about Fire Station 41 and district headquarters renovation: "Yes, expand the staff work area and add a large conference room, but maintain the fire station. It is more than adequate, and is not in such a sad case of disrepair. Maybe move the training area to the pear orchard," said Anderson, speaking of the vacant lot abutting Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School.

Depending on the agenda, the former director plans to attend future board meetings. "If it's something I'm interested in I definitely will. If tax equity comes up, I'll present an analysis that will destroy the argument," Anderson said, though he did not tip his hand. The 2019 MOFD board meetings should be exciting enough, but if the Moraga-Orinda tax equity topic arises, that meeting figures to be a performance not to be missed. "In my six years I learned a tremendous amount," Anderson said. "It enabled me to learn what the fire service really is, and it was a privilege to lead the outstanding men and women. To them, I owe a thank you."

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[back](#)

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