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Commissioner Fears Boards Will Not Pass Consolidation Plan

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District includes an Advisory Fire Commission, made up of seven fire commissioners - one appointed by each of the five county supervisors and two at-large members appointed by the Internal Operations Committee of the county Board of Supervisors. The commission meets bi-monthly, and its members advise the supervisors on district budgeting, expenditures, personnel and long-range planning.

Bill Granados is the commissioner of District 2, which includes the city of Lafayette. Granados has been on the advisory board since 2002; his four-year term expires in June. He recently discussed issues facing the fire district with Lamorinda Weekly.

LW: Until the 1990s, when the power was shifted back to the county, the commission had far more authority to handle fire-related matters. What does the fire board have the authority to do?

Granados: We have the authority to settle county weed abatement issues, and we have the authority to memorialize fire stations and to recognize individuals.

LW: ConFire chief Daryl Louder retires in October. Do you have anyone in mind to replace him?

Granados: My preference is that Chief Louder would stay. He's the best fire chief we've had in 10 years. He is very intelligent, and has terrific rapport with his staff and with the union; unfortunately, not with the media. And he has had some highly publicized issues with the board of supervisors. The supervisors will hire a consulting company to find his successor; the candidate will most likely be a chief from a small or similar-sized district or an assistant fire chief of a large district.

LW: At the April 8 Advisory Commission meeting, Louder said that "the public expects us to be smarter than we've been in the past." Is there a new, 21st century model in the works for a fire district?

Granados: We are researching a lot of ideas. A public safety department? That model may work for a city, but not for a district. A part paid/part volunteer district? Volunteers we have now cannot enter a burning building. They're not trained to do that. An engine and an ambulance at each station? That would add expense. But, everything is on the table.

LW: The county hired Fitch and Associates to do an assessment of ConFire's operations. What ideas do you think may come out of their report?

Granados: The Fitch Report may be a waste of money. They're going to suggest that we need to come up with alternative forms of funding, which we already know we have to do.

LW: What is your outlook for the fire station consolidation plan with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District?

Granados: The decision to combine ConFire's station 16 with MOFD's station 43 is a no-brainer. The vote of both boards to continue negotiations - which were each 3-2 in favor - should have been unanimous. In fact, I don't think that either board is going to approve the merger; but I hope that they surprise me.

LW: Why do you say that the merger may not be approved?

Granados: Because of political and personal agendas. Political, as in, someone is getting special treatment; where is my share? And personal, as in, someone on the MOFD board doesn't trust ConFire because of their financial problems. Well, the MOFD has financial problems too. Who owns the station, who runs the station; none of that should matter. Serving the public comes first.

LW: How challenging has it been the last few years for ConFire to maintain its level of service to the public?

Granados: We've gone from 31 companies to 24. But despite the cutbacks and the financial problems, the firefighters care about what they do. They take pride in their work. And they are committed to delivering superior public service.

The next Advisory Fire Commission meeting is June 10 at the ConFire Administration Building, 2010 Geary Road in Pleasant Hill.

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[back](#)

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