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Departures Hobble Fire Districts

By Nick Marnell

wo key managers of Lamorinda fire agencies abruptly retired July 1. Division chief Darrell Lee of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and operations chief Alan Hart-Protection District retired and were offered similar temporary roles as their districts scrambled to adjust without them.

A rash of July retirements hit fire districts statewide as a result of Assembly Bill 197, signed in 2012 by Governor Jerry Brown. AB 197 changed how retirement boards calculate pensions. No longer can certain accrued leave payouts, standby pay and pay received for other services be used to figure pension payments. Unions sued, claiming that workers had reasonably counted on the extra money being figured into their pensions. The case is on appeal, but in May a stay was lifted, so the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association was ordered to comply with the new law for retirements that started July 12.

but I understand it completely," said ConFire chief Jeff Carman, who asked Hartford to return while Con-Fire finds his replacement. "We don't need to interrupt momentum," continued the chief. "I know the unions are against this, but I need to do whatever is best for the organization."

Indeed, the firefighters union is against hiring back retirees. "It's a slap in the face to current employees, telling them that they can't do the job," said Vince Wells, Local 1230 president. He noted the irony of the situation: "The unions are paying

sented managers are not, but they're the ones being brought back."

MOFD labor representative Mark DeWeese said that the district should have anticipated Lee's retirement and ford of the Contra Costa County Fire planned for it months ago. Not so, according to MOFD director Kathleen Famulener. "We expected him to retire next April," she said. "This was not expected, and it leaves us a big hole."

"It's a safety issue," said MOFD chief Stephen Healy, explaining why the district wants to rehire Lee as a communications and emergency medical services specialist. The district is switching to the East Bay Regional Communications System this summer and Healy said that the district needs Lee's background and expertise to expedite the transition.

"I disagree that he's the only one available to do this," said Wells. "There should have been plans made to bring someone up to speed."

Not every employee eligible for the increased pension headed out the fire station door. ConFire captain Gil Caravantes passed up the higher re-"I am sorry that Alan has to retire tirement check to honor his commitment to the fire service. "I love the job, and I love helping people," he said. "It's not always about the money."



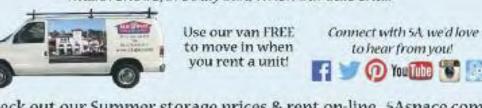
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money to fight the bill, the unrepre-

New MOFD Battalion Chief



Retired MOFD division chief Darrell Lee, left, transfers command of his shift to new battalion chief Felipe Barreto at Orinda station 45 on July 1. Photo Ohlen Alexander

or the first time in its history the Marine Corps," he said. Moraga-Orinda Fire District conducted a public transfer of command, and if the July 1 ceremony outside station 45 in Orinda had a military feel to it, that was just fine with new battalion chief Felipe Barreto.

firefighter in the United States Marine Corps," said Barreto, who, with an erect posture and solid eye contact, presents the formal, respectful air of a military officer. "Being a battalion chief should be about the same as being a sergeant in the United States

Barreto, who was born in Bogota, Colombia, lives in Lafayette with his two sons. He joined the Orinda Fire Protection District in 1989. His most memorable moment as an MOFD firefighter involved a child; more precisely, a childbirth. "I helped deliver "I began my career as an aircraft a baby in a car near the Orinda Shell station," said the chief. "The car was a Toyota Camry, and the parents named the child Camry."

> His message to Lamorinda residents was simple and direct. "Safety first," he said. "In your home and in your everyday life." N. Marnell



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