



## Fire Districts

### Public Meetings

**Moraga-Orinda Fire District** Board of Directors  
Wednesday, March 15, 7 p.m.  
Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit [www.mofd.org](http://www.mofd.org)

**ConFire** Board of Directors  
Tuesday, March 14, 1:30 p.m.  
Board Chamber room 107, Administration Building, 651 Pine St., Martinez  
For meeting times and agendas, visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

# Ten years of fire reporting in Lamorinda

By Nick Marnell



Finley Brown, 6, and MOFD firefighter-paramedic Lucas Lambert ride in a fire engine on the way to her last round of chemo on Dec. 21, 2015.

The Lamorinda Weekly made an early commitment to cover the local fire districts, and the paper boasts a fully dedicated fire beat writer, the only newspaper in the Bay Area to do so.

“Emergency service is a very important aspect of our community, and I understand the role of our fire departments,” said publisher Andy Scheck, whose father worked for the fire service in Germany and who at 15 became a volunteer firefighter himself.

Our first fire article appeared on May 16, 2007. Cathy Tyson wrote about fire safety and defensible space, quoting Tonya Hoover, Moraga-Orinda Fire District fire marshal, and Contra Costa County Fire Protection District fire inspector Robert Davis. The first printed words from a Lamorinda fire offi-

cial read, “We believe we all share in the responsibility for our fire safety,” and that challenge imparted by Hoover rings as true today as 10 years past.

Andrea Firth, the original Orinda beat writer, pushed management to include more fire reporting, and she wrote occasional articles over the first two years, mostly about MOFD. The blockbuster story during her tenure — and of the past 10 years — was the Pete Nowicki pension spiking fallout. After the board miscalculated the fire chief’s pension based on incorrect information he submitted, the result cost the district millions of dollars and made MOFD the national poster child for public pension abuse. Firth explained the situation clearly and without hysterics.

Regular fire reporting took

off after Lucy Amaral succeeded Firth in 2009. With regular reporting came more thorough district coverage, including topics like the botched purchase of an administration building on Moraga Way, the confrontation between MOFD and the Orinda Fire and Infrastructure Renewal citizens group and the resignation of two directors after the board renewed the contract of Fire Chief Randall Bradley.

Amaral retired in 2012 and yours truly took over the fire beat. Coverage increased from regular to consistent, with two to three articles per issue, including more ConFire reporting. Starting with the Dec. 17, 2014 issue, fire moved from sporadic placement in various parts of the paper into its fixed Section A location, under the Fire Districts heading, where fire articles appear in every issue.

As our fire reporting changed hands, both districts faced their darkest moments. The Great Recession hobbled both districts’ finances, with terms “structural deficit” and “bankrupt” routinely written in our news articles. The districts either closed fire stations or cut daily staffing. Both beleaguered fire chiefs resigned and returned to their roots: MOFD’s Bradley to the Central Valley and ConFire’s Daryl Louder to Virginia.

Thanks in part to an improved economy, new chiefs Stephen Healy of MOFD and Jeff Carman of ConFire led their districts into the black, and our reporting covered the subsequent turnaround of the rock-bottom morale that pervaded both districts. Carman made news when ConFire took over the available Contra Costa County am-

balance transport contract, making it the first California fire district to make such a leap.

Our longest-running fire story ignited when the city of Lafayette threatened to secede from ConFire because of the closure of its Fire Station 16, and a back-and-forth attempt by both districts to construct a joint fire station in western Lafayette collapsed. Instead both chiefs pushed for the rebuild of fire stations in Orinda and Lafayette.

The uplifting tale of the MOFD firefighters and Finley Brown, the 6-year-old cancer patient who stole their hearts, made international news. Coverage of the firefighters’ driving Brown to the hospital in a fire engine for her final chemo treatment made sound bites and headlines in media outlets worldwide. Brown continues to do well.

And just this year, we reported that MOFD elected its first female board president, Kathleen Famulener.

On a personal note, this paper took a huge leap of faith in 2012 when it hired me, an inexperienced fire reporter who did not know the difference between a fire engine and a fire truck, let alone a quint. If it were not for the help of former MOFD director Dick Olsen, it is no exaggeration to say that I would have failed. Olsen spent hours over lunches, coffee and phone calls too numerous to mention, explaining details of the fire service and the history of our fire districts.

Olsen deserves much of the credit for the success of this section of our paper. His legacy will extend throughout the future of Lamorinda Weekly fire reporting.

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## Just in: a new ConFire mobile command unit

By Nick Marnell

Thanks to funding from a regional Assistance to Firefighters grant authored by Deputy Chief Lewis Broschard, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District recently purchased a \$976,000 mo-

bile incident command unit from LDV in Burlington, Wisconsin, a manufacturer of custom apparatus for law enforcement, emergency service and homeland security professionals.

The 55,000-pound vehicle, the largest and newest of its kind in Contra Costa County, will allow incident commanders to develop their action plans inside a large vehicle capable of radio communication, satellite uplink and other advanced technology.

“Until now, our incident commanders have had to function from the backs of their pickups,” Fire Chief Jeff Carman told his advisory

commission Feb. 27. He noted an incident last fall in which chief officers managed a multi-alarm fire using their iPads and cell phones through pouring rain.

According to Lon Goetsch, assistant chief of operations, the district will deploy the command vehicle in multi-alarm fires, major rescue operations or in a specialized incident that could go on for a long time, such as a chemical spill. “It may be used during a catastrophe at a major public gathering, like the Lafayette Food and Wine Festival, or at a serious vegetation fire,” he said. In a major incident outside district boundaries, for example, in

Moraga at Saint Mary’s College, ConFire will deploy the unit at the behest of Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Stephen Healy.

Goetsch stressed that the command vehicle will be driven by trained, off-duty employees. “We will not compromise our on-duty firefighters,” he said.

The unit will be housed at Fire Station 84 in Pittsburg, one of the few district stations with a large enough apparatus bay to store a vehicle that size. The mobile command unit will likely be placed into service by mid-March.



Confire’s new mobile incident command unit.

Photo courtesy ConFire



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