



Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire District

Board of Directors
Wednesday, April 19, 7 p.m.
Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors

Tuesday, May 9, 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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MOFD fire suppression rating improves, and lower insurance rates may follow for residents

By Nick Marnell



Courtesy MOFD

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Stephen Healy announced that the district achieved an improved rating from the Insurance Services Office for its fire suppression efforts, and that improved rating may help lower fire insurance rates for many district residents.

The ISO is a privately owned assessment company that collects statistical data on how effectively fire departments put out fires.

Through its Public Protection Classification program the company rates a community's effort to provide adequate fire service on a scale of 1 to 10, the lower number equating better fire protection. MOFD had registered a 3 rating since its inception in 1997, but effective April 1, the district rating improved to 2, a score attained by fewer than 3 percent of all fire districts nationwide.

According to the ISO, 10 per-

cent of its rating reflects the community's emergency communications capabilities, including 911 telephone and dispatching systems, for which MOFD contracts with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. Fifty percent of the rating reflects the quality of the fire department, including its equipment, staffing, level of training and the geographic distribution of fire stations. Evaluation of the water supply constitutes the remaining 40 percent of the ISO rating. The company looks at the condition and maintenance of the EBMUD hydrants, existence of alternative water sources, and the amount of available water, both in terms of volume and pressure, compared with the amount needed to suppress fires.

"We received extra credit for our reserve ladder truck, keeping better training records and our fire season staffing levels," Healy said.

ConFire will undergo its ISO review this year. "We have a split rating of 3/8B," said Deputy Fire Chief Lewis Broschard. "The rating of 3 exists within all the cities we serve and many of the unincor-

porated areas. The 8B rating is applicable only in those rural and remote areas, such as Briones, where a fire hydrant supplied by a municipal water system is more than 1,000 feet from a structure." Unincorporated areas of MOFD with no hydrants received a 2X rating.

In 2015 structure fires caused \$10.3 billion in damage, according to the National Fire Protection Association. It therefore behooves insurance companies to encourage communities to lower their ISO rating, generally resulting in lower premiums for communities with better protection. Representatives of the Farmers Insurance Group and State Farm Insurance — the country's leading property-casualty insurance company — would not comment on any specific correlation between an ISO rating and insurance premiums for Lamorinda homeowners.

The ISO rates only structure fire suppression efforts. The company does not consider vegetation fires in its rating, nor does it review emergency medical service procedures.

Former Moraga firefighter takes on a massive challenge as East Contra Costa County chief

By Nick Marnell

Brian Helmick, the interim Fire Chief of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District, never imagined that he would work in fire service.

Helmick starred in football, baseball and wrestling at Miramonte High School but the three-sport athlete blew out his left knee at a football scrimmage before his senior year. It was the last day Helmick ever played organized sports.

A potential sports career derailed, Helmick struggled to find his life's purpose. He traveled to Mexico as a volunteer with

the Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church on a homebuilding mission. Through the church he met firefighters from the Moraga Fire District. He ate dinner with them. He hung out at the fire house. He began to feel similarities between sports and firefighting.

One day the captain asked Helmick to ride along on a Glorietta Boulevard vehicle accident call. He sat in the engine and observed. On the ride back to the station, the answer Helmick had sought since his football injury finally hit him. "I found it. This is it!" Helmick said of firefighting. "The camaraderie, like among teammates. The accident call itself was the game."

Helmick told the captain that he wanted to be a firefighter and the captain helped him land a reserve job right out of high school. Helmick stayed with what became the Moraga-Orinda Fire District for three years until 1998.

He left to join the Oakley-Knighten Fire District, which merged with two other districts to form ECCFPD in 2002. "I wanted to work where there was more volume and a wider diversity of calls," Helmick said. "I wanted to learn, to make an impact and then go back to MOFD. 'Tell them I'll be right back,' I said. Almost 20 years later, here I am."

Helmick felt a calling to the East County community. He loved its rural feel. He became union president and worked through the ranks to serve 10 years as a battalion chief. "I have had opportunities



Chief Brian Helmick poses with his family.

Courtesy of ECCFPD

to leave but I stayed here," he said, remaining with one of the most troubled fire districts in the Bay Area. "Our officers are expected to do a lot with a little. It's one of the reasons I came to this area," Helmick said.

It will take a leader with that perspective to handle the challenges in the district. As a result of Proposition 13, East County Fire receives an average of 7 percent of property tax allocation, unlike 12 percent for ConFire or 20 percent for MOFD. In the past five years voters have said no to two district parcel taxes, in effect telling lawmakers that it's up to them to figure out how to distribute the 1 percent that residents pay in property tax. As the region's

population has grown, fire stations have closed, leaving the district with three, though officials hope to reopen a fourth station in May.

"The situation is overwhelming and complex," the chief said. "Everything is on the table, including adjusting strategy and tactics to mitigate whatever problems we have safely and effectively."

As passionate as Helmick, 40, comes across, he made clear that his career does not define him. "My identity is Christ," he said. "My success in life is determined by my bride and my three children."

Nor has Helmick forgotten his roots. "No way would I be here if I hadn't been molded by the men at the Moraga Fire District," he said.

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Letters to the Editor

Happy Chase is coming to Moraga

Dear Editor

We Orinda and Moraga customers of Chase Bank are happy to hear that "someday soon" we will have a branch of Chase Bank in our area.

Now we drive to Lafayette to do our banking, and end up eating meals in Lafayette, shopping at McCaulou's in Lafayette, and Safeway in Lafayette, etc., etc. Orinda and Moraga are missing out on our shopping!

We don't know why Orinda refused to have Chase Bank there.

(We citizens do not ALL do our banking "online" as there are too many hackers around, as we have found out the hard way!)

Bob's Christmas Tree lot will find a good home in Moraga.

Johnette Perry
Orinda

Orinda sinkhole

Further complications may be caused by EBMUD regarding the waterline that passes through the sinkhole work site. The latest hydraulic study agreed with the box culvert design and found that the overflow pipes are not necessary. This probably means that those pipes will be regarded as a "betterment" — intentional city improve-

ments — and therefore they may be ineligible for federal reimbursement. Other elements of the repairs may also be considered betterments.

The actions taken by the city council on April 10 included adoption of a resolution extending the state of emergency, approval of the latest plans for the repair, and au-

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thorizing staff to negotiate a revised contact with Bay Cities for the construction work. The cost of the renegotiated construction contract is now estimated to be \$2.2 million, with another half million dollars for emergency work, bringing the total to \$2.7 million. The city now hopes that the repairs will be completed and the road reopened by the end of June.

Opinions in Letters to the Editor are the express views of the writer and not necessarily those of the Lamorinda Weekly. All published letters will include the writer's name and city/town of residence -- we will only accept letters from those who live in, or own a business in, the communities comprising Lamorinda (please give us your phone number for verification purposes only). Letters should be 350 words or less; letters of up to 500 words will be accepted on a space-available basis. Visit www.lamorindaweekly.com for submission guidelines. **Email:** letters@lamorindaweekly.com; **Regular mail:** Lamorinda Weekly, P.O.Box 6133, Moraga, CA 94570