



Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors
Wednesday, Aug. 16, 7 p.m.
Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors
Tuesday, Sept. 12, 1:30 p.m.
Board Chamber room 107, Administration Building, 651 Pine St., Martinez
For meeting times and agendas, visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

MOFD board appoints interim chief, retains search firm

By Nick Marnell



Soon-to-be interim fire chief Jerry Lee
Courtesy MOFD

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors named Battalion Chief Jerry Lee as the interim fire chief effective Sept. 20, the day of Fire Chief Stephen Healy's departure. The board also agreed to retain an executive search

firm to assist in the recruitment of the new chief.

Consistent with the district's hard-driving push to improve its financial picture, MOFD appointed an interim chief who has procured \$2.9 million in grant funding since his promotion to battalion chief in 2012. Lee secured a \$1.1 million FEMA Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant in 2013, which covered the salaries and benefits of four firefighters for two years, and he recently obtained a federal grant to cover the purchase of four power gurneys for district ambulances.

"It's an honor to serve the men and women of MOFD and the community. It's something I've been wanting to do throughout my career in the fire service," Lee said of

his future elevation to interim fire chief. Lee has served with MOFD since 2003.

Though he praised the announcement of Lee as interim chief, former MOFD director Dick Olsen, who went through the hiring process of Fire Chief Randy Bradley, urged the board to search as far and wide as possible for the new fire chief, if for no other reason than to confirm that Lee is the proper selection. "It's always best to use an open process," Olsen said. "Over the years, you'll be paying a person more than a million dollars to oversee tens of millions of dollars. It's a pittance of an investment."

After interviewing potential search firms, the MOFD fire chief recruitment ad hoc committee rec-

ommended that the district retain Roseville-based Bob Murray and Associates to conduct the search for the new chief. "The company has hired 15 fire chiefs in the last two years," said ad hoc committee member Craig Jorgens. Once executed, the contract with Bob Murray and Associates will not exceed \$24,000.

Director Steve Anderson cast the only vote against retaining the search firm. "I used to own a recruiting company," he said. "We would always allow a carve-out. If you make an in-house hire, you don't pay."

According to the committee, the terms of the financial arrangement with the search firm would remain the same whether for an internal or separately sourced candidate.

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Photo Courtesy Stephen Healy, MOFD

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District dispatched two engines and a water tender to the Aug. 2 vegetation fire that burned 20 acres deep into the hillside near Fish Ranch Road and Grizzly Peak Boulevard. The fire was not far from the 1991 Oakland hills firestorm that killed 25, destroyed more than 3,000 structures and burned 1,520 acres.

"This is why we practice mutual response drills," said MOFD Chief Stephen Healy, an Incident Commander of the multi-agency response team. "Agencies as different as MOFD, Oakland Fire and Cal Fire worked together seamlessly."

One Cal Fire firefighter suffered minor injuries. The origin and cause of the fire remain under investigation. — By Nick Marnell

An inconvenient liability, presented by Lamorinda public agencies

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To pay down those balances if investment goals are not achieved, agencies have to increase contributions into their pension and OPEB accounts, and according to a 2015 Contra Costa County Grand Jury report, that money "must come from either budget cuts, increased revenues, tax increases or some combination of the three. Budget cuts mean service or salary cut-backs, deferred maintenance and postponed capital improvements." Those options would hurt Lamorinda residents and impose hardships on employees.

Agencies may also prefund in order to mitigate pension plan financial performance. The fire district board recently voted to contribute into OPEB and pension trust funds, but not everyone was thrilled with the policy decision. "I have concerns with MOFD," said Vince Wells, president of Local 1230 of the firefighters union. "They seem super-focused on funding those plans. Then you start risking the services you provide."

In a roundabout way, Freeman agrees. "If agencies didn't have to make a net pension liability payment each year, that's more money that could go to services," he said.

Not only to services but also to employees. The OUSD board on June 26 planned to contribute an additional \$25,000 a year into the district OPEB trust account, but with labor negotiations underway, the teachers bargaining unit objected. "It's starting to feel to OEA leadership that this is just another way to hold money aside," said Charles Swanson, Orinda Education Association president. The board voted to not increase contributions to the OPEB account.

Because the two cities do not offer defined-benefit pension plans, Lafayette and Orinda carry no unfunded pension obligations. Moraga, which has struggled with

its finances to the point of declaring a fiscal emergency in June, is the only Lamorinda municipality that reports pension expense and a net pension liability. "The town's pension costs are not a contributing factor in the declaration of fiscal emergency," said Amy Cunningham, Moraga administrative services director.

As of 2016, the funded ratios for most of the Lamorinda agencies' pension plans hover under the 80 percent threshold, which is considered unhealthy by financial analysts. Jack Weir, president of the Contra Costa Taxpayers Association, says it's time to take corrective action and he delivered this admonition to public agencies, for starters.

"Be frank and candid about the problem," Weir said.

(Public agencies like BART, the East Bay Municipal Utility District, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District and the county itself report net pension and OPEB liabilities, which also affect Lamorinda residents, but this article focuses only on agencies headquartered in Lamorinda.)

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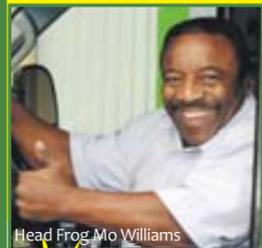
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