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Published May 13th, 2009

MOFD Discusses Current Retirement System

By Lucy Amaral

At the Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Work Session held May 6, acting Fire Chief Pete Nowicki presented the board with an overview of the fire department's current retirement system. The board had asked Nowicki to prepare the overview to help them better understand the process and if adjustments might be possible.

Nowicki broke down the main components used to compute final retirement values into five areas, then outlined what changes might occur to each and how that change could be made. Three of the components would need collective bargaining and approval from numerous internal groups, then could only be officially changed at the state legislative level. Those three are: "3% at 50," a percentage of income earned for every year worked; "Sick Leave Accrual," which can be added to the compensation total; and, the "Public Service Buy Back," which is money put in by the employee, not from public funds.

The final two sections are the "Ventura Decision," where employees may use up to one year of accrued vacation as part of their final retirement calculation; and, "Vacation Buy-Back," hours above and beyond those used in the Ventura decision which can be calculated as if they were salary. Nowicki said these might be areas where adjustments could be made, however any change would also need to work its way through the collective bargaining process.

Several members of the community spoke during the public comment portion of the meeting voicing their concern over compensation of staff, especially Chief Nowicki. Board Director, Pete Wilson, agreed in principle, however added, "We did not dream this up. The County Board of Supervisors approved this plan. We were not given another option. We are, however, looking into other ideas."

During the meeting, Nowicki wanted it to be made known that the MOFD retirement compensation does not completely come from public funds. "Employees put in between 24 percent and 28 percent of their take-home money into the retirement system. That equates to about four and a half months of yearly salary," he said.

With the current retirement system complex and layered, Board member Frank Sperling said that this was "the start of a conversation; an information gathering exercise."

The board agreed to add the components, one at a time, to upcoming work session agendas to better understand the concepts and their options.

"We need to 'peel back the layers of the onion' and start to understand the issues," Sperling said. "We need to find out what things can be changed in the future without taking away from current firefighters."

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