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# Firefighters' Union Not Happy

By Nick Marnell

Frustration is increasing and morale is deteriorating inside the fire stations of both the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Prevention District. ConFire is closing stations and laying off personnel; firefighters are leaving for a district in bankruptcy. The MOFD firefighters have worked without a contract since 2010; they've not received a pay raise in five years. And the firefighters say they now face cynicism from a captious public over many of their actions.

"Everybody is questioning 'how many fires do you go on? How many firefighters do you need? Why are you using such a big engine?'" said Vince Wells, president of Local 1230 of the United Firefighters of Contra Costa County, which represents the firefighters of both districts.

After 2007, said Wells, the districts' property tax revenue collapsed, public sector pensions became an issue and the citizens' grumbling escalated. "It's always about money and pensions," he said. "I just lost all of mine; why do you get to keep yours?" But Wells stressed that when public employees are hired, they do not go into the job with the attitude that they're going to get rich; the one thing that they are guaranteed is a pension.

"We trade opportunity for security," explained Mark DeWeese, Local 1230 MOFD representative.

Wells emphasized that the reason there are financial issues in the fire districts is not because the firefighters are demanding more money; it is because of the property tax revenue shortfall.

"If they put two people on engines and kept the same revenue, I could get paid more," said Wells, a ConFire captain. "We're fighting for staffing and better equipment. We want more people on the staff for safety reasons. If it was about money, I'd drive the engine by myself!"

Despite their unhappiness with labor conditions, Section 1962 of the California Labor Code prohibits firefighters from going on strike. "We have very limited options," said DeWeese, speaking for the rank and file. He sounded discouraged with the slow progress of the labor negotiations. "Two things MOFD wanted, which (Fire Chief) Randy Bradley stated publicly: health care costs frozen and pension reform. They got the pension reform from Jerry Brown; our health care costs are frozen," he said. "The ones who run the fire department have better benefits than the firefighters," added Wells.

The union president maintained that the firefighters' morale at MOFD

is just as bad as at ConFire, though ConFire has recently received far more negative press. "ConFire has a financial problem," he said. "MOFD has a public perception problem."

For example, at ConFire, the younger firefighters are looking to leave, further damaging an already depleted staff. "We hired five guys from Stockton; they are leaving us to go back to Stockton, a city still in bankruptcy!" said Wells. He explained that even if the district was handed \$15 million to beef up the staffing, it would take years to hire the proper number of firefighters, partly due to procedural regulations. "It'll take years for ConFire to recover," said Wells. "And I fault the board of supervisors."

In defense of the perception of the district, DeWeese explained that the MOFD should be among the highest paid group of firefighters because they work in a high-end community where the value of the property they protect is much higher. "The district has its own ambulances, and the firefighters perform advanced medical procedures," he said. "That's the service the people want, and they are willing to tax themselves to pay for it."

As to the talk of MOFD and Lafayette joining forces, Wells again appeared frustrated. If Lafayette joins the MOFD, he said, Lamorinda Fire District firefighters will be helping ConFire by responding to calls in Walnut Creek and Concord, putting the firefighters at greater risk because they would be working harder. "All of the pain happens at our level," he said.

Both Wells and DeWeese indicated that a more aggressive stance in dealing with public officials is forthcoming from the union.

"I don't want to see firefighters get angry with the public," said Wells. "We've always been able to direct our anger at the public officials, and that's the way it should stay."



**Moraga-Orinda Fire District Board of Directors Meetings**  
The Moraga-Orinda Fire District holds Board Meetings on the first and third Wednesday of every month at 7 p.m. Any exceptions will be posted in advance.

**Next meeting:**  
**District Board Meeting - June 5, 2013, 7 p.m.**  
(Go to [www.mofd.org](http://www.mofd.org) as the meeting date approaches for location and more information)

# Lamorinda Fire News Briefs

By Nick Marnell

## Orinda Vegetation Fire



Photo courtesy MOFD

On May 20 the Moraga-Orinda Fire District responded to a 4-alarm, fast spreading vegetation fire in Orinda. Structures on Descanso Drive and Donald Drive were threatened briefly. An estimated 10 acres of the Orinda hills were charred. "The fire was determined to have been accidentally started by a mowing contractor," said MOFD Division Chief Stephen Healy. Concerned residents questioned the wisdom of mowing the field on that hot, breezy day.



Photos Gail Tsuboi



## Highway 24 Accident Investigation

While on the scene of a Highway 24 vehicle accident on a rainy Dec. 2, three firefighters from the Moraga-Orinda Fire District were seriously injured and one civilian was critically injured when they were struck by an out-of-control vehicle. Sharry & Associates Inc., a Discovery Bay fire protection consulting firm, was hired by the district to investigate the accident and John Sharry will present his report to the MOFD board of directors at its June 5 meeting. Among the recommendations made by Sharry was that the district adopt a formal policy related to its operations on highways and freeways. He also determined that the district needed to provide better guidance on how to prioritize calls in situations where there are more incidents than resources available. The policy of dispatching a fire truck to freeway responses should be discontinued, he advised, for the extra vehicle added little in terms of safety but added more personnel to the accident scene, thus increasing the chance of further injury. Sharry also

cited the need to develop a policy for the safety and placement of civilians at an accident scene. Not all of the personnel at the Dec. 2 accident were wearing the proper safety equipment, noted Sharry, and he urged the district to develop a standard approach to encourage adherence to its policies and procedures, to the point of disciplinary action for offenders. MOFD Division Chief Stephen Healy said that the district has completed a draft of a Corrective Action Plan based on the deficiencies highlighted in Sharry's report and that a committee is expected to be formed in June. Also at the June 5 meeting, the board will discuss options for filling the vacancy created by Director Frank Sperling's resignation and will also review an initial draft of the district's 2013-14 fiscal year budget. The meeting will begin at 7 p.m. at the Moraga Library Community Room, 1500 St. Mary's Road. (Note: MOFD board meetings are sometimes subject to change of venue; check [www.mofd.com](http://www.mofd.com) for current information.)

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