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More Questions on Station 46

By Nick Marnell

Unconvinced north Orinda residents packed St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on Charles Hill Road July 25 to hear fire district officials outline plans to move the local fire station. The Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District are in negotiations to build a new station 46 on Lorinda Lane at the Orinda-Lafayette border, to replace aging MOFD station 43 and ConFire station 16, which closed nearly three years ago.

Operational questions were directed to MOFD chief Stephen Healy and ConFire chief Jeff Carman, and the answer most requested was how the response times for north Orinda will be affected based on the location of the new station.

Healy said that the response time data was being crunched under the direction of geographic information system expert John Radke, and that his report will be made public at district workshops that will be scheduled if the ConFire board approves the station 46 agreement.

MOFD board president Alex Evans answered the financial questions, mostly about teaming with ConFire, which is going through a difficult financial period. "ConFire is a bad partner," said an audience member.

"No they're not," said Evans. "In October 2013, we almost ran out of cash. We can't afford what we're doing now, and I have to find ways to improve that." Evans said that the district has \$70 million in debt and liabilities and he has to find some way to make the district sustainable. Either raise money, or cut expenses, he said, explaining that the long-term savings to MOFD in the station 46 venture with ConFire will be at least \$1 million per year.

Evans said that as a board member, he has to think not only of benefits to Orinda but of benefits to the entire district. "It's not how far it is from station 43 to 46. It's how far from station 46 it is to everywhere else," he said.

As to taxing residents for heightened fire service, or an additional station, Evans said that after two failures in Orinda of a bond and a sales tax measure, it seemed unlikely that the district could secure the two-thirds majority vote necessary for passage of a parcel tax.

"If this doesn't work out, we will have to do something worse," he said, hinting that the only realistic way the district can save money is to reduce the number of firefighters.

"Give me a bunch of bad choices, and let me pick the one that will hurt the least," he said. "I'll never come up with something that everyone will love."

Carman said he expects to discuss highlights of the proposed station 46 agreement with his board of directors at its Aug. 18 meeting. The board asked the chief to also present updated information on the benefits to ConFire of the jointly operated station.

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