



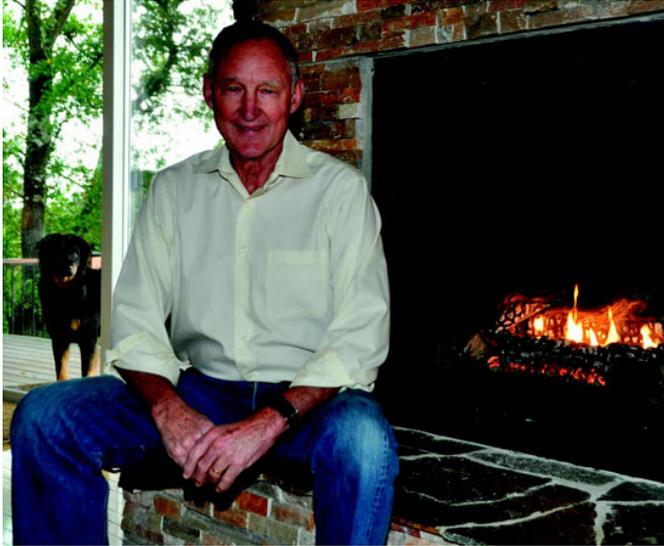
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## A Conversation with MOFD Director Steve Anderson

By Nick Marnell



Steve Anderson at his Orinda home. Photo Andy Scheck

Steve Anderson takes over as president of the board of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District in January. He shared his observations of his three years as a director, and his outlook for the upcoming year, with the Lamorinda Weekly.

LW: Are you happy that you took this job?

I am. I've learned a lot, especially about how local government functions. Or doesn't function.

LW: What's been your biggest surprise?

How ineffectual local government can be, especially at the county level.

LW: An example?

When Contra Costa County closed fire station 16, the fire chief presented a plan to his board and was excoriated by his directors. I was embarrassed for him. Nothing of value was accomplished that day. The board's efforts were counterproductive. If it were me as the chief, I would have walked out of that meeting.

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LW: What accomplishment are you proud of?

When I got here, MOFD had little ability to do financial forecasts. It was the district's weak suit, and the board recognized this. Over three years, we've done a remarkable job of forecasting our finances.

LW: So you're satisfied with the district financial condition?

I didn't say I was satisfied with our financial condition. We're working to get fiscal viability. At least now, we have the ability to measure our finances.

People will pick apart portions of our financials. Whether our unfunded pension liability is \$27 million or \$44 million or some other number people say it is, we're addressing it. We're putting out what our accountants and our actuaries tell us. Is it right? Probably not. Is it close? Probably.

LW: Why do you think the station 46 project fell apart?

It had a high probability of happening until revenue improved. It would have been a good deal for everyone. Why did it go off the rails? Frankly, I'm not sure.

But it was not because of MOFD. MOFD did not stall. We responded every time the ConFire attorney kept throwing changes back. It was never that we rejected outright any changes ConFire sent to us.

LW: Could 46 still happen?

From my perspective, I will try to keep 46 alive as long as possible. I'll be outvoted, but I think it's

best for the community, and fiscally it's an excellent deal. And despite what the residents of Honey Hill say, 46 had more advantageous response times than not.

LW: Even though you have gone on record as calling the county an "unreliable partner," you would re-enter into a joint venture with them?

Yes, I still consider the county an unreliable partner. But the contract contained provisions to protect us against them, such as specific remedies if either party pulled out of the deal.

LW: You have a very frustrated union membership.

Our employees are our best asset, period. But we can't just give them everything they want.

We are in a tenuous economy; 2008 could happen in a flash. One Islamic State attack in San Francisco, and the rate of return on our assets would plummet. We would be back where we were in 2008-09.

Maybe compared to adjacent districts, our firefighters are slightly underpaid. But it's what we can afford. We have an agreement into 2018, and I will continue to adhere to it.

LW: What do you foresee in 2016?

In my role as director, to ensure that MOFD provides the service it is established to do. And to be fiscally responsible, by continuing our rigid financial analysis. Also, to maintain our relationship with the union.

LW: Anything in particular you'd like to change?

I'd like to push the county retirement board to do even more, such as the changes it made to no longer count certain items toward pension payouts.

LW: A long-range goal?

Orinda roads are still a priority. Poor roads affect our response time, and replacing ambulances because they take a beating on the roads affects our bottom line.

Remember, it's not MOFD's job to sit on the taxpayers' money. So, once the district creates fiscal viability and achieves a surplus, shouldn't that money go back to the community? Maybe, to fix the roads?

LW: The district has taken a lot of grief - from the union, from residents, from the media, even from other public officials. How do you respond to the criticism?

To the people who want to complain, I would ask them to answer these questions:

When a resident calls, do we respond? Do we respond in a timely manner? And have we saved lives?

If they answer "no" to any one of those, then they should recall me.

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