

Published September 20th, 2017

Healy reflects on his years with MOFD

By Nick Marnell



MOFD Fire Chief Stephen Healy: More mountains to climb Photo Andy Scheck

Stephen Healy spent barely any time talking about what he accomplished as fire chief of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

Rather, a relaxed Healy, who leaves the district Sept. 20, talked over coffee and toast almost exclusively about those he worked with in his 12 years with MOFD.

"I'll most miss the people," the chief said. "Since 2006, I have been involved with the hiring or promotion of just about everyone in the district."

His interactions with people gave Healy his highest highs, but also provided his top challenge once he moved into the fire chief seat. "Deciding who to hire," Healy said. "The final say on hiring a firefighter was the biggest difference I felt as chief. You have the responsibility to hire the best people, and for some, it was tough telling them this was not a career for them."

From day one, the chief set out to establish trust in communication. If Healy had the chance to improve one aspect of his job, it would have been figuring out a way to better communicate. "We've always struggled with this. Do I send emails? Do I do station visits? Should I go through the battalion chiefs? Hold more captain meetings? The firefighters still bring it up - communication (stinks)."

The human resources and the legal aspects of the fire chief job Healy struggled with the most. "It's unpleasant, and it's all gray. That's where you sink or swim - how you handle personnel issues. The public knows nothing about those issues. The firefighters know nothing. The board knows nothing. I will not miss that."

When Healy took over as fire chief in 2013, he jumped right into the firefighter contract negotiations. The chief bore the brunt of the rhetoric and emotion along the way, as he tried to remain sensitive to both the board and the union.

His peers helped him through that tough time, and Paige Meyer, fire chief of the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, sat at the top of the help list. "During negotiations, I would call Paige, worried that the whole thing would blow. I'd call him at the end of the day, 'Dude, I'm worried, I'm nervous.' Paige was empathetic. 'I've been there. I've done it. You'll be OK. You're doing the right thing.' He was always there when I needed him."

As for the negotiated contract, "I felt good about everything except the pay cuts. The emotional impact had a big effect on a lot of people."

Operationally, Healy said he was happy with the district's lowered score assigned by the Insurance Services Office, which improved the district rating from a 3 to a 2, helping lower fire insurance premiums for some residents. And the chief repeated with pride that not one home in the district has been destroyed by a vegetation fire since 1988.

The rift between the two municipalities of the eponymous district over a perceived inequitable tax allocation barely registered on Healy's radar. "It's exaggerated. A small group of people are trying to make something more than what it is. I respect their passion, but I do not agree with their philosophy. MOFD is more than just Moraga and Orinda. We cover the reservoirs, Tilden Park, Canyon, what is it, 38 different tax zones?"

The chief may have downplayed his efforts, but others recognized his legacy. "It was great working with Chief Healy," said Local 1230 President Vince Wells. "He understood the importance of a good labor-management relationship."

"Chief Healy came in at a very difficult time and did a tremendous job getting everyone together to save the district," said Kathleen Famulener, MOFD board president. "The lights in the district remained on because of him."

Healy will continue to announce the football and lacrosse games at Monte Vista High School, where his son plays both sports. As a highpointer, the chief has scaled the highest peaks in all of the western states except for those in Wyoming, Montana and Colorado, and he intends to complete the list. "And I want to see a Steelers football game in Pittsburgh, a Denver Broncos game and a hockey game in Montreal."

But he likely will not have a lot of free time. "You can let everyone know that I am definitely looking for a job," the chief said, as his phone buzzed with another inquiry from a recruiter.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA