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Firefighters and MOFD board clash over staffing

By Nick Marnell

With a projected \$1.8 million surplus in its 2019-20 fiscal year operating budget, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board, despite pleas from the firefighters, chose to not restore full-time staffing of the ambulance at Fire Station 45 in Orinda, but opted to allocate the extra money to fund its pension stabilization and retiree health care trusts.

In 2013, with the financial problems brought about by the Great Recession, the district cut its daily on-duty staffing from 19 to 17 personnel, changing the Station 45 ambulance from fully staffed to cross-staffed; meaning, unlike Station 41 which has an engine company and a dedicated two-person ambulance crew, Station 45 has only a three-person engine company which also responds to medical calls in its ambulance when so dispatched, leaving that portion of Orinda unprotected.

To help beef up staffing, Battalion Chief Jerry Lee applied for a federal grant under the Staffing for Fire and Emergency Response program in 2016. The district requested the grant to hire four firefighters "to restore the designated 2-person ambulance company (Medic 145) at Station 45," as Lee wrote twice in the application.

MOFD was awarded the \$1.4 million SAFER grant in 2017, but Lee explained to the district board that it was not bound to any specific staffing model by accepting the money, notwithstanding what he wrote in the application.

"The grant is not concerned with your daily staffing, just the overall staffing," wrote Danielle Shelton of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which runs the SAFER program. The district had to hire four new firefighters for the three years of the grant performance period and was committed to not laying off any of them for those three years.

Based on that guidance, the board voted in 2017 to accept the SAFER grant, but declined to require the full-time staffing of Medic 145, deferring any other staffing option to a future date. As a result, MOFD daily staffing remained at 17, with the four SAFER firefighters used to fill daily vacancies.

That staffing model has not sat well with the firefighters, who have continuously lobbied the MOFD board to restore mandatory daily staffing to the prerecession level of 19. They pushed to include a staffing increase in the 2019-20 district budget, adamant that the SAFER grant money should be used for what it was intended - restoring the full-time ambulance at Station 45.

"All that is needed is a new directive from the current board to change the existing directive from the previous board as to how the personnel hired under the SAFER grant are to be used," said Capt. Mark McCullah, district labor representative. "The proposed 2020 budget accounts for a total of 57 firefighters, or 19 per day, which are all the personnel necessary to restaff a full-time ambulance at Station 45."

The district does not see it that way. Fire Chief Dave Winnacker explained that if daily minimum staffing were increased from 17 to 19, the district would incur a minimum of \$1 million in additional overtime expense, or the staffing change would require an increase in the number of rostered firefighters from 57 to 63, boosting payroll by \$1.4 million.

At the May 15 district meeting, the MOFD board did not issue the directive that McCullah sought, voting to use the operational surplus to fund its pension stabilization and retiree health care trusts to help offset the \$49 million of district net pension liability and \$15 million of net retiree health care liability. The board directed Winnacker to maintain the daily minimum staffing of 17 firefighters.

"I would not want to see those positions funded if it's to the detriment of the district," said MOFD President Steven Danziger, regarding the full-time staffing of Medic 145. "But if it's going to make our community safer and our firefighters safer, we need to take a further look at it."

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