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In 3-2 vote, MOFD board moves to increase minimum staffing of firefighter paramedics by 2

By Jennifer Wake

By the end of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District governing board's special meeting on Nov. 16, it seemed that the issue of increasing minimum staffing of safety personnel/firefighter paramedics from 17 to 19 had once again been postponed after Directors Craig Jorgens and John Jex requested more information before moving forward.

But in a surprising turn of events during the regular session, three board directors, Michael Donner, Steven Danziger and Gregory Baitx, voted to direct staff to engage in negotiations with United Professional Fire Fighters of Contra Costa County, IAFF Local 1230 to modify the Memorandum of Understanding July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2024 to increase the minimum staffing from 17 to 19 safety personnel/firefighter paramedics, foregoing further discussion.

The issue of increased staffing has been a sticking point for years. From 2007 to 2013, staffing had been increased from 17 to 19, with a dedicated ambulance service at Fire Station 45, but in 2013 the district reverted to the current cross-staffing model, under which the crew of Engine 45 staffs the ambulance when responding to emergency medical service (EMS) calls.

According to Local 1230 president Vince Wells, who spoke during the Public Comment portions of the meetings, prior to the economic downturn MOFD had two permanently staffed ambulances at Station 45 and reducing them to cross-staff ambulances "was a degradation of service." Wells said the district now has the funds to restore that ambulance. "It's an enhancement of service and it's affordable. North Orinda has the highest fire risk. Adding staff will save lives and property."

For years, questions have swirled around revenue, pension liability, future costs and potential losses, and the concern over a recurring \$1.5 million for the addition of two firefighter paramedics per shift, equating to six new personnel.

Director Danziger noted the board has been "discussing this for three and a half years now. Staffing more at 45 is safer for our firefighters and safer for our residents. Whichever model you want to talk about, this is a better model for our community."

Director Jex explained that the board cut two positions before "because we couldn't afford it. In eight or nine years, we've dropped our reserves to an unacceptable level." He went on to express concerns that in the next five years there is a high probability of a reduction of reserves. "Pension liability goes from \$25 million to \$60 million, so incurring another \$1.5 million in costs - we can't afford it."

Director Jorgens asked for more discussion. "I would agree with others saying there appears to be lack of economic data which was the sticking point." President Donner noted that the board would still be receiving reports from South San Francisco and Berkeley to review. "We're authorizing [staff] to discuss increasing [safety personnel/firefighter paramedics]," he said.

Jex expressed his dismay that they would be in this position at this time, "to ignore all the risks and ignoring everything we've talked about."

Director Baitx responded that it was negligent "that in the last four years, we have said we need more information; we're broke - next year there'll be another study. At some time we need to make a decision."

With a motion from Baitx and a second from Donner, the final 3-2 vote (with Jorgens and Jex voting no) directs staff to enter negotiations with the union to increase the minimum staffing from 17 to 19 safety personnel/firefighter paramedics and seek a qualified law firm or individual who has expertise and substantial experience in public sector employment and labor relations matters, including negotiations with labor groups, particularly public safety labor groups, to negotiate this modification to the MOU.

To watch the full discussion, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjPII9hcDI&t=11560s

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