

## Readers' Forum: New East Contra Costa County fire board has work cut out for it

**Mary Nejedly and Federal Glover | From the community**

**By Mary Nejedly Piepho and Federal Glover**  
Guest commentary

Posted: 10/31/2009 12:01:00 AM PDT

FIRE CAN destroy. In the case of far East County — it can be used to build a community.

On Oct. 27, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors' transferred control of far East County's fire protection services to local decision makers. The city councils of Brentwood and Oakley accepted the agreement later that same day.

For decades, the primarily volunteer firefighting forces of far East County provided the protection needed to douse the occasional barn or house fire. However, as these rural communities transformed into bedroom communities, their fire-protection needs stretched beyond that of an all-volunteer force.

In 2002, three small East County fire districts were consolidated into a new entity known as the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD) eliminating duplicative administrative services and ensured better coordination and communication between the stations and expanded the training requirements of the firefighters.

As far East County grew, so did the calls for more

local control and questions of governance of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District, particularly from the cities of Brentwood and Oakley.

In 2005, the county and the cities began discussions on how to restructure the fire district to achieve greater efficiencies and provide the much desired increased local voice.

Last year, an agreement evaporated into thin air because of last-minute concerns. Earlier this year, everyone returned to the table with all parties agreeing to local representation and, to top it off, a new labor contract with the firefighters who support the new agreement.

This week's agreement gives weight to the area's population distribution with Brentwood receiving four appointments to the board, Oakley selecting three, and the Board of Supervisors appointing two representatives to reflect the needs of the unincorporated areas.

It is anticipated that the newly appointed East Contra Costa Fire Protection District board will have their first meeting early next year.

As stated in the Board of Supervisors' Oct. 27 resolution approving the agreement, we wish to reiterate to the yet-to-be-appointed fire district board that strong consideration be given to establishing an elected fire board in the future. An elected board will move the district another step closer to the original intention — to ensure that local citizens have a voice in the district's operations.

The new board has its work cut out for it. They will need to find a way to increase funding for a district dependent on a 1978 property tax base that reflects agricultural land values, which is not sufficient to pay for today's suburban setting and service needs.

Advertisement



Send flowers for any occasion  
**Bouquets \$19.99**  
 from **19.99** +s/h  
 ProFlowers®  
 Order ONLY at  
[proflowers.com/happy](http://proflowers.com/happy)  
 or call 1-877-888-0688

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

ContraCostaTimes.com

However, those are discussions that the new board will have and decisions they will make. We wish them only the best as they assume the responsibilities and challenges that they will face.

We also acknowledge the leadership of the firefighters, the cities and the work of county staff for doggedly pursuing this mutually agreeable solution.

These long, and often difficult, negotiations demonstrate that with persistence, determination and good will, we can put differences aside and come together for a common good and build on something that we can all agree upon.

**Piepho represents District 3 and Glover represents District 5. They can be reached at [dist3@bos.cccounty.us](mailto:dist3@bos.cccounty.us) and [dist5@bos.cccounty.us](mailto:dist5@bos.cccounty.us) respectively.**

Advertisement

**OUR BEST DEAL EVER!**  
**\$19.99 /MO.**  
**FOR 12 MONTHS**  
w/ commitment

**FREE HBO SHOWTIME**  
FOR 3 MONTHS w/commitment

**FREE QUOTE**  
[SatelliteTVValue.com](http://SatelliteTVValue.com)

**RED ZONE**

**dish NETWORK**  
Authorized Retailer

**American Satellite** NFL

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

## Daniel Borenstein: Fire districts must pay for own spiking

By Daniel Borenstein  
Staff columnist

Posted: 10/01/2009 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 11/01/2009 09:11:29 AM PST

IF THE San Ramon Valley and Moraga-Orinda fire districts permit and enable their top officials to egregiously spike their pensions to a quarter-million dollars a year or more, then taxpayers in those regions are going to have to pay for it rather than freeloading on the entire county.

That was the message the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association sent out recently when its directors rightly voted to change the way it allocates pension expenses. Until now, as I've previously reported, the cost of the expensive last-minute bumps for fire officials in some of the most affluent communities was borne by taxpayers throughout Contra Costa.

That will change. And the change will be retroactive to 2002, meaning that the offending fire districts will be forced to assume financial responsibility for the sweetheart deals they have handed out.

Retirement board members said the Oct. 13 action was taken in response to my columns documenting the out-of-control spiking — which resulted in five top fire officials receiving annual pensions of \$241,000-\$284,000 a year — and the shifting of the cost to public agencies elsewhere in the county. The retirement board majority that supported the policy change should be applauded for its swift and

decisive action.

Retirement board backers of the change were led by Deputy District Attorney Brian Hast and ranged from Bill Pollacek, the county's fiscally conservative treasurer-tax collector, to retired long-time labor activist Paul Katz. "If employers want to give out greater benefits ... they must pay for it," Katz said. "They're not going to be riding on anyone else's back."

The difference in the reaction of the two fire districts is particularly interesting. In the San Ramon Valley, where the recently retired chief has a \$284,000 annual pension, the fire board endorsed the idea of a policy that ensures it pays its fair share of pension costs. That's commendable.

But at the Moraga-Orinda district, where its chief collects a \$241,000 yearly pension and continues to work for the district under a separate contract, the fire board responded by directing its attorney to review the retirement association policy. If the board of that wealthy fire district balks at accepting financial responsibility for its actions, if it sues to make the rest of the county pay for its transgressions, that would be shameless.

The unfair cost-shifting was created because the Contra Costa retirement system covers not only county employees and retirees, but also those from 16 other local governments. Employees are grouped by the types of pensions they receive — with sheriff deputies and firefighters, who earn more lucrative pensions than the rest of the workforce, segregated from other employees.

But all public safety workers were grouped together. The pool includes not only county sheriff deputies and firefighters, but also firefighters from three separately run agencies, including San Ramon Valley and Moraga-Orinda. However, the county agencies

Advertisement

**don't delay**  
get proven, proactive  
**identity theft protection**  
**CALL NOW**



**1-888-896-1878**

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

account for about 80 percent of the pool.

Employers and employees from each agency contribute money to the pool to help fund anticipated future pension costs. But when the cost of individual pensions is boosted beyond expectations by a district's generous spiking policies, the extra cost is spread over the entire pool rather than being charged to the individual district.

Thus the county, the largest participant in the pool, was left to absorb most of the unanticipated costs created by the compensation rules of the San Ramon Valley and Moraga-Orinda fire districts, which have the top five public safety pensioners in the county retirement system.

In the San Ramon Valley district, a deputy chief, an assistant chief and two fire chiefs, who all retired in the past seven years, are each bringing home annual pensions that far exceed the base salaries they were earning during their final year of employment. By increasing their final year pay — through credits for items such as unused vacation pay, administrative leave and sick leave — the officials were able to boost, or "spike," their pensions by 24 percent to 49 percent.

In the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, Chief Peter Nowicki used similar techniques to increase his retirement by 55 percent. That included roughly a 20 percent hike made possible by contract changes his board approved three days before he announced his retirement.

Under the new retirement association policy approved Wednesday, the pension pools will be disbanded, retroactive to Dec. 31, 2002. The actuaries will have to calculate the actual financial effect of the change on the county and the districts. Some might pay more in the future while others pay

less.

As a result, the county and each of the districts will be individually responsible for the costs created by their unique retirement policies. The freeloading will end.

**Borenstein is a staff columnist and editorial writer. Reach him at 925-943-8248 or [dborenstein@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:dborenstein@bayareanewsgroup.com) .**

Advertisement



**9/17: Homeowners Fail to Take Advantage of Gov. Refi Plan**

**\$90,000 Mortgage for Under \$499/Month!**

**RefinancingNow.org**

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

November 3, 2009



## Kensington Fire Protection District Becomes Newest District of Distinction

On October 16, 2009, Kensington Fire Protection District became the newest District of Distinction through the Special District Leadership Foundation. The District of Distinction accreditation is one of the most prestigious local government awards in the state of California. This award clearly validates Costa Mesa's commitment to good governance and to ethical and sound operating practices.

Kensington Fire Protection District met a list of requirements involving policies, procedures, continuing education and audit standards to receive this accreditation. They are the 12th District of Distinction since the program began in 2006, joining:

- Bear Valley CSD
- Chino Valley Independent Fire District
- Costa Mesa Sanitary District
- El Toro Water District
- Kern County Cemetery District
- Leucadia Wastewater District
- Mesa Consolidated Water District
- North County Cemetery District
- Olivenhain Municipal Water District
- Stege Sanitary District
- Vista Irrigation District

When asked why Kensington Fire Protection District decided to apply for District of Distinction accreditation, Fire Chief Lance J. Maples stated: "The Kensington Fire Protection District pursued the District of Distinction accreditation to demonstrate our level of understanding and fiscal responsibility in providing essential public services." – Brenda J. Navellier, Administrator.

Interested in Becoming a District of Distinction?

Special districts provide the most efficient, responsive local services to California communities and yet they have been under frequent scrutiny by the media and Legislature, which allege that special districts are often invisible and unaccountable.

SDLF has developed the District of Distinction program to help correct these misperceptions by providing districts with a means for proactively demonstrating their viability as providers of essential public services.

Why become a District of Distinction?

Prove your district understands and respects the responsibilities inherent to providing essential public services in a fiscally responsible manner.

Earn the right to use the program's seal on district materials.  
Receive a plaque honoring the district's accomplishments.  
Have SDLF issue press releases and notify legislators on the district's behalf.

Submit your application to become a District of Distinction by clicking on this link to the application <http://www.sdlf.org/images/DODapp.pdf> or contact Diana Zavala, SDLF Administrator, at (916) 231-2939.

[California Special Districts Association](#) | 1112 I Street | Suite 200 | Sacramento, CA 95814 | 877.924.CSDA (2732)

A Proud California Special Districts Alliance Partner

## Moraga-Orinda fire department names new chief

By Roman Gokhman  
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 11/04/2009 08:38:49 PM PST

Updated: 11/04/2009 08:38:49 PM PST

MORAGA — A former Alameda County fire deputy chief has been chosen to run the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

The district's board of directors appointed Randy Bradley to the post Wednesday, the fire department announced.

Bradley, 47, will step in for Pete Nowicki, who recently retired. Bradley has 28 years of fire fighting and paramedic experience. Besides working for the Alameda County department, he also was chief of the 75-member Lawrence Livermore Fire Department.

He was chosen out of nearly 60 applicants, in part because of his experience in wildland firefighter expertise, Moraga-Orinda officials said. He is chairman of a National Fire Protection Association committee that drafts standards for wildland fire protection and served on several similar boards.

Advertisement



**GET MOVIES DELIVERED**

With **BLOCKBUSTER Online**®, you get:

- Over 90,000 titles
- Discounts on DVD and game purchases from [blockbuster.com](http://blockbuster.com)
- FREE in-store DVD exchanges (depending on plan)
- No due dates or late fees

**Free Trial at [MovieRentalValues.com](http://MovieRentalValues.com)**



Print Powered By  **FormatDynamics™**