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ConFire to Upgrade One-Third of its Fleet

By *Nick Marnell*

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Agenda Item 13c

Fire chiefs know all about timing. Their jobs revolve around - and their performance is gauged by - improving the incident response times in their districts or departments.

Exhibiting this knack for timing, Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Carman asked that his board approve a \$1 million annual lease-purchase payment for new fire apparatus, subsequently requesting adoption of an ordinance that will allow ConFire to charge \$1 million annually in first responder fees. The Board of Supervisors, acting as the ConFire board of directors, unanimously approved both requests at its Dec. 9 meeting.

ConFire will purchase nine fire engines, three aerial ladder trucks and one rescue truck from Pierce Manufacturing Inc. in 2015 under a 10-year lease-purchase agreement through Oshkosh Capital. "This replaces 33 percent of our aging fleet," said Carman, who added that he expects to request a similar order in the next fiscal year, with an annual goal of \$2.5 million dedicated to replacing district apparatus. The first new vehicles should arrive in the fourth quarter of next year.

Though he would not confirm that any of the new engines will be assigned to Lafayette stations 15 or 17, Carman did say that one of the new trucks will be delivered to station 1 in Walnut Creek, which is the first backup for structure fires in Lafayette. He also confirmed that the new squad vehicle, ordered earlier this fall, will arrive at station 1 on Jan. 17. It, too, will back up calls into Lafayette.

The cost recovery ordinance allows ConFire to collect reimbursement from insurance providers for the actual costs of its services rendered on emergency medical calls. Carman stressed to the board that all costs recovered will be from the insurance companies or the federal government and not from individuals. "Not collecting this fee is subsidizing the insurance companies," he told the ConFire Advisory Fire Commission the previous evening. Though individuals without insurance will still be billed, the district expects to facilitate a compassionate collection approach for those without the ability to pay. Carman anticipates \$1 million in annual reimbursements, but he said that a consultant suggested the amount could exceed \$1.5 million.

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District, less than one-tenth the size of ConFire and sporting vastly different demographics, generated \$100,000 in first responder fees in the last fiscal year, according to administrative services director Gloriann Sasser.

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Supervisors Approve ConFire Labor Contract

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, acting as the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District board of directors, approved a new labor agreement between the district and Local 1230 of the firefighters' union at a special Dec. 19 meeting. The highlights of the new contract include a 7.5 percent pay increase, the gradual elimination of the 9 percent firefighters' subvention of the employer portion of retirement costs and beginning in 2016, an equal split between the district and the firefighters for any increase in their medical benefits premium. The contract term runs July 1, 2014 through June 30, 2017.

"The contract maintains a balance between how much we bring our firefighters up in wages and what we need to do for the organization after not allocating any infrastructure money over the last few years," said Fire Chief Jeff Carman. The board recently approved a \$10 million purchase of fire apparatus for this fiscal year, with a similar purchase expected next year. Carman stressed that his goal for 2015 is to be able to maintain the district's 24 companies and two squads as they are currently assigned.

"Based on the current circumstances - coming out of a recession and trying to rebuild our district - I think it's a fair contract," said Vince Wells, Local 1230 president. "Our firefighters have not had a pay increase since 2008. In fact, we lost 10 percent. We tried to get some of that money back and get it back in a timely fashion."

The contract is cleverly constructed to give the rank and file a bump of some sort every six months beginning Jan. 1. A 2.5 percent wage increase kicks in then, followed by another 2.5 percent July 1, with a final 2.5 percent raise July 1, 2016. Three percent of the subvention of the employer retirement contribution discontinues Jan. 1, with a further 3 percent reduction Jan. 1, 2016 and a final 3 percent decrease exactly one year later, at which point the entire 9 percent subvention disappears.

"In the long run, the 9 percent retirement contribution going away was the biggest thing for us in the contract," said Wells.

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San Leandro Hospital emergency room at risk

By Rebecca Parr rparr@bayareanewsgroup.com

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CASTRO VALLEY -- A health care district board was expected to take the first step Tuesday night seeking an installment plan to pay \$19 million it owes, a move that could threaten to shut down San Leandro Hospital's emergency room.

The money had been earmarked to subsidize the struggling hospital through most of 2015. Whether smaller payments over time would be adequate to keep it open is questionable, Alameda County Supervisor Wilma Chan said Tuesday. The supervisor brokered a deal last year to keep San Leandro Hospital open as a full-service hospital for at least two years.

"If they're talking about paying the settlement over 10 or 20 years, they're putting the hospital at risk of closing its emergency room. I'm very disappointed," Chan said earlier Tuesday.

Eden Township Healthcare District owes the money after losing a lawsuit to Sutter Health. Sutter waived its claim so the funds could go to the money-losing hospital, Chan said. Eden Township and Sutter Health have been negotiating payment terms for more than a year.

"We are still in negotiations with the district. We've been working on trying to reach an agreement," said Stacey Wells, a Sutter Health spokeswoman.

Representatives for Alameda Health System, which now owns the hospital, could not be reached for comment.

If the Eden board agrees with a staff recommendation that paying the money in a lump sum would be a hardship, the district would then ask a judge to approve an installment plan.

Sutter Health transferred ownership of the hospital to Alameda Health System, the county's public health consortium, in October 2013 and wrote a check for \$14 million to help with operation expenses the first year. The hospital's finances have improved, but it continues to lose an average of \$1 million a month, Chan said.

"Eden was supposed to cover the second year," Chan said. Eden Township's board agreed to the hospital subsidy arrangement at its June 2013 meeting, the supervisor said.

The district's CEO, Dev Mahadevan, disagreed with Chan's interpretation of the board's vote, saying it only committed to trying to find the money to help subsidize San Leandro Hospital. The motion directed staff to "work collaboratively with Alameda Health System and the Alameda County Health Department to raise up to \$20 million to support the second year of operation of San Leandro Hospital."

"We have said to them over and over we will try to raise the money," Mahadevan said Tuesday.

"We explained over a year ago that we are not able to raise the funds."

The health care district does not have enough cash to pay the lawsuit settlement in full, he said, and has only about \$2 million in funds that are not restricted.

Chan said the district could sell off some property to make good on its debt.

"Their net assets for fiscal 2014 are \$47 million. My understanding is that under the law, they're allowed to dissolve 50 percent of their assets without going to a vote of the people. They could do \$20 million under this scenario," she said.

Mahadevan called selling property a hardship to residents of the district, which includes Hayward, San Leandro and the western unincorporated areas of Alameda County. Loss of rental income "would deprive them of health grants the district gives," he said.

Eden Township owns three medical office buildings in San Leandro, Castro Valley and Dublin. Rental income helps pay for community health grants; this year, it awarded \$200,000 to 13 agencies.

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Barber Joins MOFD Board

By Nick Marnell



Brad Barber Photo provided

As did directors Steve Anderson and Alex Evans when they joined the board, new Moraga-Orinda Fire District Division 4 director Brad Barber exudes a passion to improve the condition of Orinda roads.

"I was co-chair of Measure J, a partial solution to fix Orinda's appallingly bad roads," said Barber, speaking of the \$20 million bond measure that Orindans approved in 2014. Barber noted that while MOFD will benefit from improvements to Orinda roads, the district is partially responsible for their deterioration. "The fire trucks and ambulances need good roads in order to provide good service," he said. "In addition, the equipment is not easy on our roads, and the roads in Orinda are not very good to begin with. And they have not been well maintained." Anderson ran for his seat after watching a citizens' group complain to the Orinda City Council that if MOFD funds were assessed and allocated equitably, more money would be available to fix Orinda roads. Evans, newly elected board president, was a founding member of the Fire and Infrastructure Renewal committee, an Orinda group that espoused a similar platform.

"It's not a question of not getting our money's worth, exactly," said Barber, who was appointed to the board in lieu of election after no challengers emerged for the District 4 seat. "There is an issue of equity between different parts of the district. Orinda and Moraga are different places, with different needs, different topography,

different property values." Many Orinda residents have long maintained that they pay well over \$1 million more for district services than they should, and that they unfairly subsidize Moraga residents.

"If we were starting from scratch, I don't think we'd fund the district this way," continued Barber. "We'd treat it as a single district, one entity. We'd treat the taxpayers in one area the same as the taxpayers in another."

Barber brings experience as a tax attorney and financial manager to the board. "MOFD has received a lot of bad publicity over the preceding few years and I wanted to see if there was something I could do," he said. "It's time to stop deferring the district's financial problems to future generations. It's time to solve these problems now." Outgoing MOFD president John Wyro promised district residents that a tax increase will not be necessary to cure the district's financial problems, highlighted by a \$40 million unfunded firefighters' pension liability. "It's too early for me to make that assessment," said Barber. "I would like to be able to solve the problems without raising taxes. But I'm not able to speak with the confidence that John has."

The new director also stopped short of a full-fledged endorsement of station 46, a proposed consolidation of MOFD station 43 and closed station 16 of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. "Financially it looks good," he said. "But how do we provide service to north Orinda to make certain that the residents aren't seriously disadvantaged? If some Orindans are more negatively affected than those affected positively, how do I weigh that? I need to learn more about it."

Barber was sworn in at the Dec. 17 district meeting. The south Orinda resident stressed that a solution to the above problems will not magically materialize. "It will require a lot of work over a sustained period," he said.

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