

Vote Yes on Orinda/Moraga Fire Merger

By **LYNDA LEONARD**
Editor

The essential reason for a merger of Orinda and Moraga fire districts is tax money and the control over how that money is spent. In the years since Proposition 13 was passed, Orinda's fire district has not fared well - fire stations require routine repair and seismic retrofitting, new equipment is needed, and \$299,358 from a reserve of \$776,477 is being used to balance the proposed budget for fiscal year 1997-98.

On the other hand, thanks to a fire flow tax passed in 1980, Moraga's fire district is fiscally strong - so strong that they haven't needed to assess the tax for the last two years. Their stations and equipment are well maintained, the stations are seismically retrofitted, and their paramedic firefighters make Moraga the only fire district under the control of the county board of supervisors that provides paramedic service.

Between 1979 and 1993 a pooling arrangement (Special District Augmentation Funds), which gave the county greater flexibility in funding county fire districts, resulted in more than \$2.5 million of Orinda's fire tax dollars being transferred by the county board of supervisors to other county fire districts.

As a consequence, Orinda didn't have enough money for equipment replacement nor for routine maintenance and seismic retrofit of its three fire stations, all of which are situated within five miles of the Hayward fault. Furnaces and water heaters at Orinda's stations are not seismically braced; exhaust removal systems are inadequate or nonexistent; truck doors at the station on Orinda Way are not currently wired to an emergency power circuit, which itself needs to be upgraded; and there are no laundry facilities for decontamination of protective clothing.

The need for local paramedics is critical. Our firefighters' average



Cartoon by Orinda architect Dick Ling

response time is five minutes, whereas the county-provided paramedic service (AMR), stationed in Walnut Creek, has a response time averaging almost 12 minutes (two minutes above acceptable county standards) and all too often takes much longer.

A couple of years ago a two-year-old Orinda child choked to death on a carrot. AMR never arrived because the AMR driver, unfamiliar with Orinda's narrow winding roads, couldn't find the house. This incident alone is reason enough to have local paramedics who know their way around Orinda.

Orinda's quest for paramedics began in 1988. In 1989, after a year-long study, a committee appointed by the city council recommended that Orinda initiate a paramedic program similar to Moraga's. The fire district in 1989 did not agree, however, saying that the emergency medical technicians were adequate and paramedics too costly. (See page 13 for a history of Orinda's efforts.)

Today - eight years later - we still do not have paramedics on duty in Orinda. We learn that Con Fire (the county's Consolidated Fire District), has begun paramedic training of six firefighters and that four newly-hired paramedics will soon begin firefighter training. Hopefully the newly-hired paramedics will be on duty in August. Paramedic training for the firefighters will take about a year, though, and funding for this training is not in the current budget.

A wedding of Orinda and Moraga fire departments will make for a good marriage. Both communities are fiscally conservative and value the security of adequate reserves. We see a fiscally strong Moraga fire district as proof that a six-cent fire flow tax can do the job.

Orinda's fire district will recover and flourish if we, as voters, give it a chance. We must, however, approve the fire flow tax which requires two-thirds approval, otherwise the merger won't take place. In years when the tax isn't needed, it won't be assessed, as Moraga has proved over the past two years.

What's in it for Moraga and those parts of Orinda that are in the Moraga fire district? Local control (both Moraga's and Orinda's current fire commissions are advisory only), protection from annexation into Con Fire, and a strong Orinda fire department which will provide back-up for their paramedics.

The proposed merger is the culmination of two and a half years of intensive research and study, beginning with yet another city-appointed fire committee and ending with a joint Orinda/Moraga committee. It is a good plan that protects Moraga by requiring that Orinda fire achieve parity with Moraga before any funds are mixed. The reason for consolidation of the two fire districts is essentially the same as the reason for incorporation: control over our own destiny.

The June 3 vote may be our last chance for local control of our two fire districts because, if the measures fail, Con Fire is apt to try again to annex both the Moraga and Orinda fire districts.

Orindans, vote yes on Measures A, B, and C! Those in the Moraga fire district, vote yes on Measures AA and BB!

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