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Founding Member of Moraga-Orinda Fire District Honored

By Nick Marnell



John Wyro Photo Ohlen Alexander

You have to wonder how many lives have been saved thanks to that day in 1995 when Orinda developer John Wyro flipped through the newspaper, looking for something to do.

"The county supervisors ran an ad looking to replace board members at the Orinda Fire District. I thought, maybe I can help here," said Wyro, who will be honored March 18 as the 2016 Orinda Citizen of the Year. He got the job, thanks to his background in Vacaville city management, where Wyro had prepared a \$13 million budget and negotiated the union contracts.

It didn't take him long to figure out that the citizens of Orinda would be better served by a merger between the Orinda and Moraga fire districts. Wyro saw that Contra Costa County supplied the OFD with old equipment, the closest ambulance was assigned to Walnut Creek and paramedics did not staff the district apparatus. He talked with fire officials in Moraga and he orchestrated the creation of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District in 1997.

"Of all the community work I have been involved with, the formation of MOFD was the most rewarding," he said. "As a result, we brought paramedics to Orinda, and lives have been saved. If you can do that, nothing else really counts for much."

Gordon Nathan served with Wyro on the original MOFD board. "John was right in the thick of it, lending his ideas and opinions," he said. "He was elected the first board president and was instrumental in seeing that the new district built its first new fire station in almost 50 years."

Wyro said his biggest public service frustration came shortly after he left the MOFD board, on which he served for nearly 17 years.

"Station 46 was the low point," he said, referring to the failed joint venture between MOFD and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District to erect a fire station at the Lafayette-Orinda border. The consolidation was expected to save each district \$1 million annually in operating costs.

"I still think 46 was the best thing for the community and the taxpayers," he said. "We could have done a lot of things, not the least of which was to take care of the unfunded liability." The district recognizes more than \$28 million in net pension liability as of 2015.

"The breakdown was the lack of commitment from the county; \$1 million to the supervisors is not really that big of a deal," said Wyro. "But the community got an extra fire station, so if that's the worst thing that's happened, then I guess it's not too bad."

Wyro met his wife, Evans, while they were students at Utah State University. Married 47 years, they have two daughters, each with two children. It was Wyro's family who inspired him toward his original Orinda volunteer commitment, as assistant coach for his daughter's Orinda Youth Association soccer team.

"The coach quits, now I'm the coach," he said. "After a game I was approached by two members of the Orinda school board. They were getting ready to surplus sites, and they knew about my career as a developer. They asked me if I'd run for a board seat." Wyro won the election and served on the Orinda Union School District board from 1985 until 1989.

Today Wyro serves as a board member of the East Bay Waldorf School, again at the behest of his family. "My daughter teaches there, and the school has some land issues coming up. It's the best of both worlds," he said. At least until he once again flips through a newspaper and finds another Orinda volunteer opportunity that he simply cannot refuse.

The March 18 Citizen of the Year dinner at the Orinda Community Center starts with drinks at 6 p.m., and dinner at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$55. For tickets, go to Park Plaza Real Estate, 18 Orinda Way, or call (925) 254-7766.

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[back](#)

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