

Firefighter pay bump comes early

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MORAGA -- Bolstered by stronger finances, Moraga-Orinda Fire District leaders are fast-tracking across-the-board salary increases originally slated to go into effect next year.

Directors Brad Barber, Kathy Famulener and Fred Weil last week approved raising salaries at the beginning of December rather than next July, as spelled out in a labor contract approved by a board majority last year.

Board Vice President Steve Anderson opposed the motion, echoing his prior vote against the contract. Board President Alex Evans was absent.

The decision accelerates the restoration of salaries cut in response to financial turmoil during which the district depleted reserves and borrowed from its capital fund to keep the general fund afloat. Coupled with a 1 percent raise this July, the 2.5 percent increase scheduled to go into effect Dec. 1 restores 3.5 percent salary reductions greenlighted by directors in 2014.

While board members offered little comment about their decision to speed up the raises, Weil voiced his approval.

"I'm pleased that we're doing this," he said. "I think this is the right thing to do under the circumstances. I'm happy that we're able to do it."

Fire Chief Stephen Healy -- who volunteered last year to reduce his own \$220,000 base salary by 3.5 percent -- acknowledged the pay cuts were painful for staffers.

"I'm sorry this had to happen in the first place," Healy said. "I'm glad that we're getting back toward where we should be. There's more work to be done and I look forward to a bright future for the district."

Following the salary restoration, employees will see their pay go up by 1.5 percent next July, and could also receive additional increases of up to 3 percent if the district meets certain revenue targets, according to their contract. Salaries will increase again by 4 percent in 2017, and could go up an additional 3 percent if the district again hits specific revenue goals. A 1 percent raise is scheduled to follow in 2018.

Stressing the impending increases simply eliminate an "unnecessary" pay cut, United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County Local 1230 representative and MOFD firefighter Mark DeWeese expressed disappointment with current compensation.

"Our stagnant wages and lagging medical benefits have caused a growing recruitment and retention problem for our district along with growing frustrations among the current employees," DeWeese said. "We hope the future salary increases in our current contract will help keep MOFD competitive, and look forward to working collaboratively to take any necessary future actions to ensure that we continue to have a quality fire district."

The board had initially mulled 9.5 percent cuts before agreeing to the new contract.

The district has projected it will spend about \$7.5 million on base salaries and about \$2.3 million in total overtime this fiscal year, according to administrative services director Gloriann Sasser.

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