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Published January 18th, 2012

Concern over Fire Safety in the Bluffs

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In the aftermath of a late-December house fire on Joseph Drive, some residents of the relatively remote Bluffs neighborhood questioned the adequacy of the water supply in the steep hills and the tools provisioned to the firefighters of the Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD), and expressed concerns for their safety.

MOFD Division Chief Darrell Lee was the Incident Commander the night of the fire. "We were informed of a chimney fire on December 27 at 11:26pm," he says. "We had a fire engine patrolling the Bluffs at that time and they immediately responded to the call." Five other engines, one truck and one Medic were dispatched as well to contain and extinguish the fire that started in the master bedroom where a chimney was located.

"I went over when the fire started," says neighboring property owner Sal Captain, "water was leaking from the hoses that were connected to a hydrant positioned lower and away from the house." Captain felt that he was walking in a situation where firefighters were struggling to get enough pressure for their hose, while the property owner was fighting the fire with a garden hose.

Lee explains that the closest fire hydrant was located in a nearby cul-de-sac, 700 feet away and 80 feet lower than the house. "The pressure of that hydrant should have been between 50 and 120 pounds per square inch (psi)," he says. "We measured it at 50psi that night. The fact that it was 700 feet away and 80 feet lower reduces the effective pressure at the head of the hose. In cases like that, we put one of our engines at the fire hydrant and boost the pressure by relay pumping. This is a technique that we use routinely in Orinda where homes can be located at the end of long driveways, far from the hydrants."

The home's original developer had built a redwood water tank above the house to be used in case of fire. The Town had the property owner dismantle it later because it was visible from the scenic corridor. According to Bluffs resident Frank Comprelli, the Planning Department had the owners install a standpipe adjacent to the house. "When we arrived the owner informed us of the presence of the standpipe, but we measured only 10psi pressure there," remembers Lee. "There are rural areas where water tanks are beneficial, but we prefer to rely on our own water first."

It turned out that night that using the East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) hydrant was not necessary. "We had enough water in the engines that came to Joseph to put out the fire," says Lee. "But we had nonetheless laid out and filled 700 feet of hoses, to be ready if things had gotten worse. 700 feet of hoses filled with water can weigh a ton and the pressure can make it difficult to unscrew from the hydrant, so the firefighters cut the hose to relieve the pressure. This gave birth to the rumor of fire hoses bursting." According to Lee the fire was put out in 20 minutes.

Lee believes that the Bluffs have a sufficient municipal water supply system. The locations that concern him are rural areas and steep terrain with limited access to fire apparatus. "There are sufficient EBMUD fire hydrants in the bluffs," he says, "long driveways create a challenge, but nothing we can't overcome. We have some lower pressure hydrants in the Fire District, but none where water does not come out of when opened."

Captain says that he wants to find out more about the adequacy of the fire prevention and firefighting equipment. "We live very close to open space," said the property owner, "some large expanses of land are left unkempt. It would be a nightmare if a fire were to start up there."

Comprelli also wants 100% certainty regarding the efficiency of the firefighting infrastructure, "particularly in light of the presently ongoing evaluation of a development plan for 100+ homes in Bollinger Canyon in very similar terrain," he notes.

Coincidentally, a second fire ignited in the Bluffs two weeks later, on January 11th. A garage and the cars in it were destroyed in the flames. The MOFD's report indicates that it took 18 minutes to circumvent the combustion. "These incidents are getting the neighbors talking together and this is good," says Lee. "We are going to conduct FireWise meetings in that neighborhood and educate residents about creating a sensible defensible space around their homes."

FireWise is a free home assessment audit offered by MOFD to all interested residents. For more information, go to www.mofd.org and www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0513/Firestorm-Prepare-Your-Home-FireWise-home-assessments-offered-by-MOFD.html

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