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Planning Commission Looks at Shared Fire Station

By Cathy Tyson



View of proposed location of shared fire station, Lorinda Lane at El Nido Ranch Road, on the far western edge of Lafayette. The home on the left is in Orinda. Photo Cathy Tyson

Very basic potential plans for a joint Orinda/Lafayette fire station on El Nido Road were presented to the Lafayette Planning Commission last week in a study session. Looking for constructive feedback prior to submitting a building application is a productive way to test the waters of the planning commissioners who may ultimately approve or deny the project.

Located literally on the border of Lafayette and Orinda-one edge of the property line is on the city limit-this potential 2.5-acre site could not be more centralized to serve both communities, however there is a large hill on the property that would limit available construction locations. The Moraga-Orinda Fire Department (MOFD) and Contra Costa Fire Protection District (Con Fire) are interested in sharing the station, although they haven't formally agreed on all the details.

MOFD's chief Randall Bradley, along with architect Alan Kawasaki, presented a bare bones preliminary drawing of what a station at this site might look like. ConFire's chief Daryl Louder was unable to attend the meeting. One key element of the design is the drive-through apparatus bay or fire truck garage with openings on either end. Also on site would be housing and adequate parking to accommodate fire personnel.

"We'll do everything we can to address concerns of the adjacent neighbors," said Bradley. He estimates a station here would receive about three calls per day and most of those, 80-85 percent, would be medical calls. The chief addressed noise concerns, noting they only use the siren as necessary to get through traffic and that late at night "we don't use sirens."

If MOFD and Con Fire officially agree to work together, they would need to file an application for a land use permit, then go through the rigorous design review process and finally be approved by the planning commission.

Some neighbors who live in the immediate vicinity weren't convinced that a station in the El Nido area is a good thing, citing privacy, traffic and noise concerns. "I don't want a two-story fire station looking down on my backyard," said one neighbor; another, who lives on El Castillo, said he'll be "greatly impacted." However Anna Beck, who lives on the Lafayette side, was fully in support of a new station. "We love it, love the security," and she added, "Lamorinda should work together on this."

George Burt of the Acalanes Valley Homeowners Association has sympathy for neighbors but said, "We're in trouble right now," referring to the unexpected closure of the Lafayette Los Arabis station in Happy Valley, leaving residents on the west side of town with no fire station close by.

Planning commissioners had mixed feedback for the potential applicants. Commissioner Jeanne Ateljevich encouraged the fire departments to go forward with making a more detailed plan, commissioner Patricia Curtin-Tinley shared neighbors' concerns of location and privacy, questioning the large parcel, and commission chair Karen Maggio mentioned that she used to live near the now-closed Los Arabis station and appreciated the sense of security, describing the station and staff as good neighbors. She suggested, "It's important to look at the greater good," and "this is an ideal location, good street access." She also expressed confidence that the design review process would address privacy concerns.

(Editor's note: MOFD's board of directors was scheduled to vote March 26, after our press deadline, on whether to allow the \$15,000 deposit for purchase of the property at 1035 Lorinda Lane to become nonrefundable. Check our website for updates.)

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