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Fire Awareness 101: What Lamorindans should know about roadways, materials, and escape plans to stay safe

By Nick Marnell, Sophie Braccini and Cathy Dausman



El Toyonal in Orinda is one of the most challenging roads in the district. Photo Andy Scheck

Imagine living in a 4,000 square foot home loaded with the latest in technology, but having to watch the World Series on a 19-inch, black and white television, constantly juggling the rabbit ears to improve the signal, and getting up out of the chair to adjust the volume. Firefighters deal with a similar enigmatic situation as they navigate some of the precarious roadways in the upscale Lamorinda area on their way to a fire or an emergency medical call.

Forty years ago, cars were smaller and fire engines were smaller. When homes were built in the '60s and '70s, larger road width was unnecessary, the slopes were graded much more severely and the required vehicle turning radius was far less. But the roads have not changed with the times. "Lafayette has the potential for the most significant problems in our district," said Contra Costa County Fire Protection District fire marshal Lewis Broschard. "We are dealing with existing, non-conforming roads. If the same subdivisions were built today, those conditions would never be approved."

In the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, the roads in El Toyonal are difficult for the firefighters to navigate. "That area is our number one concern," said battalion chief Sean

Perkins.

On a fire call, a large number of responders need to arrive in a short period of time. When the access is difficult, the fire attack and the rescue efforts can be challenging. "If the engines need to park far away, because of the road conditions, it's tougher to get all of the equipment close to the scene," said ConFire inspector Ted Leach. "Plus, after a fire is put out, we need to free up resources quickly. And releasing resources on those roadways can be problematic," added Broschard.

Since they cannot change the roadways, the firefighters take extra precautions to familiarize themselves with their first due areas. So if they are dealing with an incident on a particularly troublesome road, such as Hunsaker Canyon Road in Lafayette, said Leach, they know they will face issues with the roads and the terrain - plus additional obstacles like narrow private bridges and small water mains, which add to the firefighters' challenge.

"Park in your driveways," urged Perkins, to the homeowners on those older roads. There may not be a sign on the road that says 'No Parking,' said Broschard, but he posited for common sense. "If you can't get your car up the narrow, winding hill, around all of the parked cars, how can we do it?"

Homeowners can help the firefighters with a few basic strategies at their residences. "Please be sure that there is a visible address on your property," advised MOFD assistant fire marshal Kathy Leonard. The inability of the crew to see a house number adds to the response time, especially at night, she said. Trees overhanging the roadway can also be problematic. "We need at least a 6-foot clearance for our vehicles," said Perkins.

There have been a lot of homes sold recently in Lamorinda, which could mean there will be many new residents living in the area. "Heed the Red Flag Warnings!" was Broschard's advice.

Perkins offered an even more sobering suggestion: "Watch video from the 1991 Oakland Hills fire to get an understanding of the treacherous situation that can occur."

And did occur.

- Nick Marnell

Fireproofing Your Home

Chief Randall Bradley of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District said it clearly: protecting one's home against fire danger is the responsibility of the homeowner first.

MOFD and other local agencies are comprised of very qualified personnel, but should the conditions be right a catastrophic fire could hit our area and Bradley believes we could lose approximately 200 homes. The chief shared lessons based on scientific fire studies conducted in recent years at a public workshop June 10. It is possible, he said, to protect one's home and increase the odds that it would not be touched if a wildfire strikes Lamorinda.

"There are big flames, medium flames, and flying embers," explained Bradley. "Big flames burn trees and propagate at the canopy level; that's not what causes homes to catch fire most of the time. What are more dangerous are the flying embers that can travel from distant fires, can collect where flammable material is piled or can enter attics through unprotected vents and start a fire." Bradley presented a video of a home in the woods that was retrofitted for fire prevention.

"The first thing is the roof," he said. Bradley does not like wood shingles, even the treated ones. Why? "They are made of wood," he said. He recommended a composite roof. The retrofit also included the siding of the house. Vinyl and wood are not great options; the best product is fiber cement siding. And there are landscaping steps that can be taken so the fire passes over or around the home.

"Monterey pines, oleander, eucalyptus, are very dangerous in a fire situation," said the chief. He recommended removing them and replacing them with native trees such as oaks. Lower branches should be removed; of course, dead branches and brush as well. Close to the home, the recommendation would be to plant the least flammable vegetation such as grass that's well watered, fire resistant plants, or pavement. Wood decks, a wood pile, and wood furniture should not be close to the house.

Still unsure? Call MOFD at (925) 258-4525, ext. 524 to arrange for a free assessment of your home. To find a list of fire-resistant plants, visit

www.bewaterwise.com/fire02.html or www.theodorepayne.org/plants/fire_resistant.htm.

- Sophie Braccini

Plan Ahead for Emergency Escapes

"Evacuation is dangerous," said Lamorinda Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein. He cited the 25 deaths caused by the 1991 Oakland/Berkeley Hills fire, and the life-threatening evacuations experienced by Denver residents during the Lower North Fork fire in March to make his point.

Given just minutes to flee your Lamorinda home, what would you do? What would you bring?

First, know that every evacuation will be different "dependent on many factors, such as type of event, prevailing conditions, size of area to be evacuated and time factors," said Moraga Police Chief Robert Priebe. The key to a successful evacuation is to plan ahead. "You're only as good as the plans you have in place," agreed Lafayette's George Figone, of the Lafayette Emergency Preparedness Commission.

LEPC is re-writing an older city-wide evacuation plan that should be complete by the end of summer. But initial planning "is up to the residents themselves and should apply to any emergency - wildfire evacuation, earthquake, etc.," Figone said.

Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team program manager Duncan Seibert suggests residents have two out-of-state contacts to notify in event of an evacuation. Call them before you leave, Seibert said, and call them again when you have relocated. In addition to all-weather clothing and toiletries, evacuees should carry a first aid kit, including medications and prescriptions, baby and pet necessities (including immunization records).

Bring a flashlight, radio and batteries, cell phone or two-way radio, extra batteries, car and house keys, and proof of residency. Carry cash in small bills and change, and keep your car filled with gas. Load a flashdrive with vital documents, and send a copy to your out of state contacts, Seibert said.

Rein recommended the three-pronged approach of wild fire prevention, planning and action found in the YouTube video "Ready, Set, Go!" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feMlaars9kc>). He also suggested signing up for text or email messages at the county's Community Warning System: www.cococws.us/getCurrentAlerts.action.

"You can't plan for every event, but you can get some generalities [in place]," echoed Lafayette Police Chief Eric Christensen. Take the time to run basic "battle drills," and "spend five minutes thinking about if you got the call," he urged.

"If you think you should go, go!" said Rein. "And leave early."

- Cathy Dausman

Online Emergency Preparedness Resources

Today's electronic media makes it easier than ever to receive timely community warnings of dangers and disasters, both natural and man-made. Residents can subscribe to their city's Nixle, Twitter or Facebook accounts, and assuming wireless coverage is available, monitor them regularly. Emergency preparedness resources online include:

General emergency preparedness:

www.lamorindacert.org

Fire/wildfire:

- www.readyforwildfire.org

- www.wildlandfirersg.org/

- www.mofd.org/services/emergency-preparedness

Emergency communications (amateur radio) training:

- groupspaces.com/K6ORI/

Town or city-wide electronic notifications:

- moraga-police-department@emails.nixle.com

- lafayette-police-department@emails.nixle.com

- <http://tinyurl.com/l4yjpd>

Contra Costa County Community Warning System (CWS)

www.cococws.us/getCurrentAlerts.action

Twitter accounts:

- https://twitter.com/Moraga_OrindaFD

- <https://twitter.com/CityofOrinda>

- <https://twitter.com/lovelafayette>



MOFD personnel conduct a fire assessment at a Moraga home. Photo Sophie Braccini



A 2-acre vegetation fire in Orinda on June 14 was quickly taken care of by MOFD. Photo Stephen Healy, MOFD



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