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Preparing for Precipitation

By Cathy Tyson



Photo Cathy Tyson

News of a forecasted wet winter is everywhere, and city officials have spread the word to property owners, but despite encouragement to clean debris from storm drain areas, there will inevitably be some homeowners who will get an unpleasant surprise in the coming months.

In preparation for the anticipated wet new year, the city is "zealously cleaning out city-owned storm drains," said Public Works Director Mike Moran. He explained that Lafayette has a master storm drain map, based on field reconnaissance and TV pipe inspections from about 20 years ago. "As we delete, add or replace sections of storm drain, the map is updated by our engineering department."

Although Moran is relatively new to his position as director, he has been an engineer with the city for almost 20 years. He described how the city plans for rain events. "Following the El Nino storm of Jan. 1, 1997 staff noted the worst spots and created storm patrol lists. These lists have been edited over the years, but are still in use

today. During a heavy storm engineering staff and public works crews drive specifically to the 'hot spots' on the patrol list to make sure everything is draining as it should. Most of the time just moving a pile of leaves can get things flowing appropriately."

As the city gradually addressed paving and drain repair backlogs over the years, Moran reports that "most of the hot spots from 1997 have been eliminated because the problem was taken care of as part of road and drain projects."

Privately-owned storm drains that are common in many of the older hilly neighborhoods in Burton Valley, Happy Valley and Reliez Valley are a real problem, acknowledges Moran. They can start to fail and may be clogged with debris after years of drought. Usually the negatively impacted homeowner calls public works for a clean out, said Moran, but in that situation, it is a neighborhood issue and not the city's problem.

Homeowners are also responsible for pipe cleanout, if their driveway has a pipe underneath where the gutter would normally go. Although the area could be considered the public right of way, the property owner is responsible to keep the pipe clear of debris so storm water won't get backed up.

Culverts and v-ditches under driveways and along property lines should be inspected to make sure they are open. The city website spells out a list of property owner responsibilities that focus on being debris-free to not obstruct the flow of water.

Residents who are lucky enough to live along a creek are responsible for maintaining the storm water drainage system on their property to prevent flooding. Lafayette has 13 miles of creeks bordered by more than 1,000 home sites within the Las Trampas Watershed. Called "the ultimate storm drains for our city," the Homeowner's Creek Guide notes they are critical to carry runoff from creek-side properties and to provide a habitat for wildlife.

It was only three years ago, on Dec. 2, 2012, that a deluge of rain caused upstream debris and a torrent of water to create a 15-foot sinkhole on Mountain View Drive. The roadway collapsed and utility pipelines took a hit, and even sewer lines broke. At the time, city senior engineer Matt

Luttrupp pointed out a major contributing factor was the amount of branches, leaves, urban artifacts and garbage that was washed down the creek, which caused the blockage that created water wearing away soil above and below the drain pipe. Residents in the area likely remember the mess and inconvenience.

In anticipation of precipitation, homeowners should take a good look around their property for potential issues. Those who may be worried about flooding can go to the FEMA website (<https://msc.fema.gov/portal>), which has a flood map service center where residents can search for a flood risk map for a particular address.

Need Sandbags?

Not one, but two locations in Lafayette are available for those who need sandbags, complete with shovels, a couple of traffic cones with the tips cut off so they can be used as funnels, bags, and, of course, sand.

Diagonally across from the Veterans Memorial Hall at the corner of Village Center and Mt. Diablo Boulevard is station number one. The sand will have a tarp on top to keep it dry. The second spot is at 3001 Camino Diablo at the city's public works yard, between the Lafayette Tennis Club and the El Curtola Bridge.

City officials ask that sandbags be limited to 20 bags per person. For those who need more, they should be purchased at Diamond K, Home Depot, Lowes or other home improvement stores.

An ounce of prevention is not a bad idea, given the likelihood of significant rain. Property owners should make an effort to ensure storm drains and culverts are clear of debris. In case of flooding, call the City of Lafayette Public Works Department, main number (925) 934-3908 or hotline at (925) 299-3259.

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