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## Development heating up for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District

By Nick Marnell



Some new developments in Lamorinda had streets widened to accommodate engines. Photo Andy Scheck

the detour to be able to take care of emergencies, Leonard said, which illustrates the main reason for the ordinances and the fire code: public safety, including that of the firefighters.

In a large development like Wilder in Orinda, there must be at least one point for emergency vehicle access. "We have to have a way to get in, the gate must be locked and the road paved. The road may also be used for an evacuation," Leonard said. She described a proposed building near the Wilder subdivision that offered no rear access for a fire engine. The project was denied. "Firefighter safety is a huge piece of this job," she said.

Access presented problems for two other Orinda developments. The road into J and J Ranch did not meet a fire code requirement that calls for easy access to vegetation behind the homes, but the neighborhood did not want to make any of the necessary improvements. "We demand a reasonable degree of fire safety, and the developer finally agreed to bring the road up to code," Leonard said.

The eight-lot subdivision at the end of Lavenida Lane required extensive work as the steep road at the top of the driveways initially left no room for a turnaround, and fire equipment cannot back down a hill. MOFD also added a fire hydrant at the top of the driveway and had to increase the size of the water main to allow a higher flow because the project lies in a Cal Fire-recommended Very High Fire Severity Zone.

An increased turning radius to accommodate a fire engine was also required of the developer of Via Moraga across from the Rheem Shopping Center, as the 18-unit complex features very narrow roadways.

"We try to be fair with the developers, but they are putting up a project in our district. They have to abide by our ordinances and our fire code," Leonard said.

Sometimes geography makes things difficult. Palos Colorados lies at the Moraga-Lafayette border, at one of the farthest points in the district from a fire station. The development will feature homes up to 5,000 square feet and lots of open space, which will require extensive vegetation management. "People want to enjoy the open space, but open space can burn," Leonard said.

Because the 71 homes in the proposed Indian Valley subdivision lie in a straight line along a ridge near the Valle Vista staging area, not only is egress unsafe but there is no space for engine turnaround and only a single emergency vehicle access point. "The driveways will be extremely steep, and the road to Canyon is winding, dangerous and not stable," Leonard said. That project remains far from completion.

In the case of the Camino Ricardo subdivision in Moraga, the district insisted that the homeowners' association agree to maintain the vegetation in the common areas, which include a pedestrian bridge to Commons Park, to adhere to the fire code.

Not every situation with a developer is a confrontation, Leonard said. "Most of them are pretty savvy," she said. "We keep each other on our toes." She specifically mentioned Brooks Street, one of the original Wilder developers, as very easy to work with.

Fire Marshal Kathy Leonard runs the Moraga-Orinda Fire District inspection division and business is booming. "The growth is nice, but..." she said, and as she dug through her drawers of files and maps and pulled out two 4-inch thick environmental review documents for evidence, her nonverbal follow-up was clear: Leonard is very busy.

"The projects can take years start to finish," Leonard said, and since people want to build now, after a lull during the Great Recession, at least a dozen developments reside on the books in the district approval process. She found time between her plan reviews and building inspections to outline the challenges the district faces with some of these new developments.

Summerhill Homes' Bellavista project on Rheem Boulevard is on hold until the road dries out. Nothing more has been done there beyond installation of a temporary water supply the district approved for two model homes. "We also required clear access through

But the bottom line for the district is safety, and is non-negotiable. "These developments will be here long after I'm gone," Leonard said. "I will not sign a final building permit until our work is done.

"We're not doing this on a whim."

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[back](#)

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