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New MOFD chief tackles a longstanding Orinda problem

By Nick Marnell



MOFD aides Connor Rowan, left, and Pete Stathakos conduct hydrant testing in north Orinda. Photo MOFD

Rehnstrom, EBMUD manager of water distribution.

Fire Chief Dave Winnacker outlined his plans to maximize the available water supply in north Orinda and to mitigate the hazards presented by the area's wildland terrain at the Feb. 21 meeting of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. The chief's presentation made clear that the district, whose hands have been tied by financial limitations, outside agency policies and voter indifference, will focus on what it can do, rather than complain about or remain hostage to what other parties say they cannot or will not do.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District, which owns most of the fire hydrants and water infrastructure in the fire district, replaces underground pipes on its own terms, on its own timetable. "EBMUD will not, as the only participating agency, undertake system modifications solely to improve fire flow," the district states in its Fire Flow Improvement Program. Since 1999, the water district has replaced 19 miles of the 130 miles of underground pipe in Orinda, according to David

Studies concluded that \$50 million was needed to update the inadequate piping infrastructure, which Orinda voters declined to fund via three different ballot measures. So Winnacker began the search for the worst of the worst of underperforming north Orinda hydrants by doing fire flow measurements with EBMUD, which will insert the calculations into a shared database. MOFD will test 15 hydrants per week, with hydrants flowing at less than 500 gallons per minute as the top priorities. "Once these are completed, we will have an updated report on where the problems are," the chief said.

Concurrently, MOFD will prominently label acceptable water sources, so that when outside agencies flood into the area to help fight a major fire, suppression personnel will be able to easily identify reliable water sources. The district will also identify supplemental water sources, like pools and ponds, privately maintained water tanks, and water supplies along Bear Creek Road and the Briones Reservoir.

The second part of Winnacker's plan features heightened levels of fire mitigation. A wildfire spreading down from the Bear Creek Road and Briones areas is a major threat to north Orinda, and noting that the best fire attack is fire prevention, the chief said the district will quarterback the efforts of wildland fire mitigation among various agencies and private citizen groups.

EBMUD owns open space adjacent to north Orinda, PG&E owns several large parcels in north Orinda and the county road maintenance crews are responsible for maintaining the shoulder of Bear Creek Road. Winnacker said that the district will assist the agencies to make sure that mitigation efforts are reinforced and complementary, such as arranging for the Cal Fire Delta Crew to trim back vegetation in the Bear Creek area. The chief noted that, though often not popular, the PG&E tree trimming efforts have real value for fire prevention.

MOFD will also coordinate efforts of neighborhood groups to carry out fuel mitigation efforts, and will encourage homeowner associations to create safe, defensible spaces. Notification and evacuation plans have been updated, though the chief said that an early warning is needed for a wildfire that starts on the north side of the ridge.

"We want to identify things we can do now within our existing budget, utilizing and leveraging people's money through the grant process and engaging the community to buy in to everything they can do to prevent a catastrophic wildfire from spreading," Winnacker said. The chief pledged that, though north Orinda has been identified as the No. 1 target area, the water flow and mitigation programs will eventually be rolled out into the rest of the district.

Dick Olsen, a former MOFD director and a revered founding father of the fire district, praised the chief's attempt to fix a problem that has frustrated the district since its 1997 inception. "This is way beyond what anybody else has ever done," Olsen told the board.

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