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Fire officials issue defensible space guidelines

By Nick Marnell



Weed abatement is needed in a big way at this Moraga property. Photo Nick Marnell

Bay, it's all gone. The entire community - no more neighbors, churches, schools - they're gone. It is well worth the investment of time and energy to prevent this." Fire officials stress tree trimming, with no low branches under 6 feet from the ground. Keep the tree branches 3 to 5 feet away from the roof, and remove dead trees. "Lafayette has more trees than anywhere in our district, plus Lafayette is in a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone - there are bigger potential problems in Lafayette than anywhere else. Pay attention to what's going on around you, especially in the Upper Happy Valley and Hunsacker Canyon areas," said Robert Marshall, fire marshal of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District.

Marshall also advised homeowners to keep their gutters cleaned. "People only think about cleaning their gutters in the winter, but do it in summer too. An ember can land into a clogged gutter and ignite," he said.

"We have been very fortunate in Lafayette over the past few years not to have had any devastating wildfires, and I hope the residents will take our recommendations seriously and we can have another safe year," ConFire Chief Jeff Carman said.

MOFD offers individual home assessments so homeowners can understand how unruly vegetation can prevent their home from surviving a fire. Tall grasses can be especially dangerous, Leonard said, so trim them to 3 inches. And clear out underbrush. "Grass transitions to small shrubs to large shrubs to trees. It's like building a campfire - you start with kindling, and go up to logs," Marshall said.

Leonard noted that people who live on an interior street have sometimes 15 feet of open space between their fence line and a major arterial like Moraga Way, which is a major Moraga evacuation route. Homeowners must maintain that area as the open space is on their parcel. In a heightened emphasis for 2018, the district will be leaving notices to clear the open space on approximately 350 parcels along Moraga Way.

MOFD will focus on improving its messaging this year by mailing out postcards, placing sandwich boards throughout the district, and posting information on social media and the district website, to make clear that everyone has to do their part. "Due to the semirural nature of our area and our proximity to large areas of undeveloped land, the risk of wildfire is very high," Fire Chief Dave Winnacker said. "Defensible space reduces the risk of damage to individual properties, and when taken in the aggregate, reduces the risk to entire neighborhoods and our community as a whole."

"We're burying our heads in the sand if we don't do anything," Leonard said.

Weed abatement deadline for Lafayette is May 31 and for Moraga and Orinda is June 15.

According to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, defensible space is the buffer you create between a building on your property and the grass, trees, shrubs or wildland areas that surround it. This space slows or stops the spread of wildfire and it protects your home from catching fire - either from direct flame contact or radiant heat. Defensible space is also important for the protection of the firefighters defending your home.

After the horrors of the 2017 North Bay wildfires, both Lamorinda fire agencies are pushing extra hard this year to convince residents of the importance of this fire safety measure.

"Your home is your most important asset," said Kathy Leonard, fire marshal of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. "Not just the building, but the contents. The loss of life's memories - you can't put a price on that. In the North



A prime example of weed abatement at this Lafayette home, though the tree on the left could use trimming.
Photos Nick Marnell



This Orinda property features strong defensible space elements. The tree is not touching the roof, the landscaping is well maintained and there are no tall grasses near the structure.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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