

Published September 5th, 2018

Wildfire evacuation talk fills Orinda auditorium

By Cathy Dausman



Orinda residents Jack Babcock (left) and Cheryl Nevares locate their streets on the city's evacuation district map. "It's wonderful training," Nevares said. Photo Cathy Dausman

A neighborhood social media conversation about the use of outdoor sirens in Orinda as wildfire alerts sparked a public forum on electronic alerts and included detailed map updates of Orinda's 25 evacuation zones. Attendees filled the seats in the Orinda Library auditorium Aug. 22 and additional chairs were brought in as residents heard from police, fire and emergency preparedness speakers.

The siren idea went down in flames.

Contra Costa County Community Warning System manager Heather Tiernan called the use of such a system completely dead, even in tornado alley. Tiernan said sirens are "ugly, loud, non-targetable and expensive," that old civil defense sirens can't be retrofitted, and new ones are expensive to install and maintain. Besides, Moraga-Orinda Fire District Fire Marshal Kathy Leonard said residents might not even hear sirens inside a well-insulated home.

The focus instead was on receiving Nixle and CWS alerts. Orinda Chief of Police Mark Nagel said the countywide CWS system is even more efficient than the Nixle system local law enforcement uses.

Evacuations are dangerous business both for firefighters and the public, Leonard said, as she promoted the department's free Fire Wise assessment program. "Ahead of the fire is an ember storm blowing 60 miles per hour." Leonard told residents they must act quickly when it comes time to leave.

What if you're not alerted? Nagel and MOFD Emergency preparedness coordinator Dennis Rein responded, "Do something yourself!" Lamorinda CERT program manager Duncan Seibert added, "Refill your gas (tank) when it gets to half."

But Seibert's comment that a little planning goes a long way rang hollow for at least one former Santa Rosa couple who relocated to Orinda. "We packed an earthquake 'go bag,'" the husband said, "but no one told us we'd need a fire go-bag." When a firestorm like that erupts, "planning goes out the window," his wife added.

"We're all in this together," said Rein, who noted that Police Chief Jon King plans to schedule a similar meeting in Moraga. Rein also expects a response soon from Lafayette Police Chief Ben Alldritt.

One audience member was upset city council members did not attend. "Safety is not being addressed," Valerie Colber said, adding the city has put "priority over paving when our lives are at stake." Mayor Amy Worth expressed regrets she was unable to attend but pointed out the city's police chief attended and participated in the meeting.

"The city and the fire district work together," Worth said. "We care deeply."

To begin receiving alerts from police or county agencies, sign up at: www.nixle.com and <https://cwsalerts.com>

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