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MCC Evacuation drill fills Moraga Way

By Cathy Dausman



Emergency crews at Moraga Way at St. Andrews Drive intersection prepare to divert to northbound-only traffic. Photos Cathy Dausman

A steady stream of northbound car traffic filled Moraga Way in the early morning Dec. 15 spilling by design into the southbound lanes. The traffic – quick, quiet and orderly – was part of a simulated 3.2-mile-long wildfire evacuation of the Moraga Country Club neighborhood weeks, perhaps months in the making. Dennis Rein, emergency preparedness coordinator for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District said this first-ever fully functional Lamorinda area wildfire evacuation exercise was a joint venture overseen by MOFD and Moraga, Orinda and Lafayette police departments.

“I’ve never heard of anybody turning contra flow traffic in the Bay Area,” Rein said. “We’re breaking new ground here.”

A contingent of first responder observers from neighboring communities and government organizations were on site, as well as a large volunteer corps from the Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team, MOFD Support 241 and the Lamorinda (amateur) Radio Group. “This is not just the agencies doing the evacuation,” Rein said. “We’re depending on residents to buy in (to the drill).”

And buy in they did. MCC residents Clay Claassen and Susan Karplus approached MCC general manager Ron Haas earlier this year to inquire about training their residents. When those three reached out to CERT and local police “they got a sense of how interested we were,” Karplus said.

Haas then approached MOFD

Chief Dave Winnacker. Haas said initially 370 of 521 Moraga Country Club residents opted into the exercise, but he did note a conflict with an early Miramonte High School water polo competition, so was unsure how many would actually commit.

“It takes a village to fight fires in California,” said Cal Fire’s Mike Marcucci, assistant Chief for East Bay operations, who said his organization really relies on local cooperators (MOFD in Moraga and Orinda, for example) until they get their responders on site “from the other side of the county.”

A third-generation firefighter, Marcucci remembers town sirens used as flood alerts in the 1990s. Having today’s technology which includes reverse 911 phone calls made to targeted cellular and landlines and providing detailed instruction is huge, he said. Technology played an important part in the exercise, from customized electronic alerts to data collection, mapping software and even drone videos.

At 7:01 a.m. notifications via text, email and voicemail went out through a customized Contra Costa County Community Warning System list. Within minutes a steady stream of traffic turned left off St. Andrews Drive and northbound onto Moraga Way, occupying both northbound and southbound lanes.

The exercise ended at Glorietta Boulevard, where drivers were allowed to turn right and head home. “We had so many flares on the ground at Glorietta, from the smoke you would

have thought it was a real fire,” observed Orinda Chief of Police Mark Nagel.

In all, more than 100 automobiles made the drive. “It was interesting,” said MCC resident Frank Newborn. Newborn and his wife Amy were part of the exodus. “I’m not sure how well it simulated a real situation, as it obviously was a learning experience,” but the Newborns did identify two elderly neighbors who don’t drive.

A few uninformed drivers were detained at St. Andrews Drive and Moraga Way, and a few MCC late participants were turned back. Normal traffic flow was re-established around 7:30 a.m. “Everybody came back safely,” said MPD Chief of Police Jon King, who called the event “a game changer.”

“People on both sides learned something,” he said, adding “I had officers asking to work the event, even on their day off. God forbid this would really happen, but we know now we can do it.”

“We’re in the crawling stage of a worst-case scenario,” Winnacker said, “but this (drill) will arm us with what we need to do.”

“Armed with what you saw today, educate your neighbors,” he said, and “learn to be resilient, self-reliant, and able to heal.” When this happens “there will be no lift-assist calls (answered),” Winnacker said.

Rein said plans are being made to run similar evacuation drills in Orinda, Lafayette and Canyon.



Moraga police chief Jon King and Orinda police chief Mark Nagel attend an evacuation drill briefing.

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Wendy & Andy Scheck
Lamorinda Weekly

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