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School news: OUSD deals with possible wildfires, distance learning; summer school plans

By Sora O'Doherty



Sleepy Hollow Elementary multi-purpose room
Photo Sora O'Doherty

The Orinda Union School District board met on April 13 via Zoom and dealt with two significant issues: how distance learning was going and how to protect students from wildfires when they return to school.

A resolution to observe California's Day of the Teacher on May 13 passed unanimously. Board president Cara Hoxie observed that "Our teachers have been heroes during this distance learning," adding that what the teachers have done since they began distance learning in March is extraordinary, especially given that everyone came with different levels of comfort.

Board member Carol Brown praised the teachers for rolling out a very fast delivery of a new way of learning, "in many cases, while their own kids are home too." How exactly the day will be observed has yet to be determined. The board will brainstorm with parents' clubs and volunteers.

Charles Shannon, president of the Orinda Education Association, commented on the effort to move to distance learning. "It's been a remarkable effort," he said, that "pushed us into 21st century learning." He added, "It isn't easy, but I feel that we are getting better at this every day. It is very hard, but very rewarding. I have a feeling that kids will be stronger, more resilient, better prepared." The board is currently in the process of developing survey questionnaires to help it gauge the success of the distance learning experience.

The board also tackled a matter that had been tabled so that Director of Facilities Stuart House could verify that the roof structure of the multi-purpose rooms at Wagner Ranch and Sleepy Hollow elementary schools can support the proposed weight of sprinkler systems between 100 and 150 pounds.

MOFD Fire Chief Dave Winnacker told the Board that there are concerns about rapid fire intrusion at Sleepy Hollow School. Sleepy Hollow, like Wagner Ranch elementary school, as been equipped with a 10,000 gallon water tank to enable a MOFD fire truck to pump water and protect the students and staff gathered in the multipurpose room. But Chief Winnacker worried, "What if we are not able to get a fire engine there?" Therefore he asked the OUSD to install a rooftop sprinkler system as a first response to a wildfire. The chief explained that he was talking about a big "mister" to wet down the roof and surrounding areas. At 12% moisture, it is unlikely that flaming embers or brands would ignite the roof. It isn't a perfect solution, he said, but an available interim step.

House answered questions about Sleepy Hollow School, including details about a generator to power the sprinkler system, which will be installed a sufficient distance away from the multipurpose room, in a separate shed, shielded with cement board to minimize the possibility of fire getting close to it. There is no likelihood that fire will get close to it, he said, and it is highly improbable that a generator would explode. The matter passed unanimously. The board also passed a resolution designating the public works as essential, so that work can proceed while the schools are still closed.

In other school-related news, John Nickerson, Superintendent of the Acalanes Union High School District that includes all three high schools in Lamorinda, told Orinda Mayor Darlene Gee at her monthly Liaison Meeting that schools have been directed to be closed through the academic year, and are starting to have conversations beyond that. Summer school will be distance learning as well, he said, and officials are beginning to think about what things might look like in the fall. It is still too early to make any definite plans for that, he concluded.

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[back](#)

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