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Local stakeholders collaborate on heightened fire prevention efforts

By Nick Marnell

Neighborhood groups, municipal leaders and fire district officials agree that fire prevention is a top concern of Orinda and Moraga residents, and have backed up the rhetoric with tougher code enforcement and increased community participation in fire prevention programs. Orinda lawmakers also said they intend to use a portion of a proposed sales tax to fund added fire prevention efforts in the city.

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District bolstered its code enforcement program this year and conducted 2,300 property assessments from June 16 to mid-July. More than 1,760 properties were assessed in Orinda and nearly 540 in Moraga, with 79% of the parcels free of code violations.

Property owners whose parcels failed the inspection were given 30 days to correct the violations, and owners who ignore the citations can be ordered to a hearing before the fire district board of directors. In July, the board directed the fire chief to begin abatement proceedings against eight Orinda property owners who ignored communication from the district.

Neighborhood groups are doing their part to mitigate dangerous fuels by signing up for a national fire prevention program and availing themselves of a free chipping program offered by the fire district.

The Firewise USA program, a joint offering of three national organizations and sponsored by the National Fire Protection Association, encourages homeowners to take individual responsibility for preparing their homes from the risk of wildfire. According to program materials, Firewise provides resources to help homeowners learn how to adapt to living with wildfire and encourages neighbors to work together to take action now to prevent losses.

The voluntary program has been around since 2002, has nearly 1,500 active member communities and boasts a participation retention rate of 80% over the past decade. The latest NFPA figures show Orinda with 11 Firewise groups and Moraga with four.

"I'll do what I can to see whether there is anything Moraga can do to push the program more," Moraga Mayor Kymberleigh Korpus said.

MOFD recently instituted a wood chipping program, available within the district upon request. Since the program inception, the district removed 90 tons of chipped material from Moraga neighborhoods and 100 tons from Orinda.

The program was so successful that the district halted the chipping in June because it could not keep up with the demand, as district fire prevention efforts shifted to inspections and compliance. Chipping will resume after the end of fire season.

The city of Orinda took a major collaborative step by intending to set aside a portion of its proposed one cent sales tax to be used for fire prevention efforts. "Whatever we do with fuel mitigation will be in addition to the baseline that the fire district is already involved in," said Dennis Fay, Orinda council member.

MOFD budgeted \$834,000 for fire prevention in 2021. As the Orinda proposed sales tax is a general tax, the city could not commit to the amount of money allocated for fire prevention.

The mitigation work performed by district residents has not gone unnoticed, by both property owners and the fire district itself.

"For the district to be successful we need to be able to partner and work in collaboration with our citizens and property owners," Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs said. "I think we have been very successful in building a positive working relationship with the citizens of the fire district."

Still, some residents show no interest in complying with either the fire district requirements or the wishes of the community.

"We are working hard to educate everyone on the importance of defensible space and the measures that homeowners can take to reduce their risk from wildfire," Isaacs said.

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