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Special Council Meeting outlines wildfire preparedness and response

By Lou Fancher



Fire service preparation and planning made a difference in 2020, when fighting brush fires like this one. Image provided

and severity, "It's never too early to start," might also apply. Residents and agencies must not silo, but work in combination to keep communities safe and informed, he said.

ConFire Deputy Fire Chief Aaron McAlister along with Chris Bachman and Jeff Peter addressed planning, preparedness, prevention and emergency response initiatives. McAlister called last year's "career fires" the new normal. These "career" or mega fires are sometimes spread over a million acres and the Lafayette community is within range of several high-fire areas.

Mentioning this year's drought, McAlister said preparedness - grass and vegetation mitigation - in 2020 "paid off." Last year's lightning-caused fires, he said, were unusual, but the risk of pole-related fires continues to be a concern. Added engines and other fleet resources and hiring an extra dispatch person (funded by resources issued from the state) are recent improvements. After Fire Station 16 was reopened in 2019, Crew 12 was doubled up to increase from one- to two-hand crews, which work seasonally and use hand-held tools to assist. With increased aerial fleet assist possibilities, more network cameras under ALERTWildfire and the high enrollment of residents in the Community Warning System, McAlister said people partnering with public safety agencies is key to being prepared and safe.

Duncan Seiber of Lafayette CERT said there are 19 evacuation zones in the city. CERT teaches people to be prepared because when a disaster strikes, he said citizens (not firefighters) are the first on-site responders. To that end, CERT has sold over 20,000 emergency drinking water drums (191,300 gallons) to residents. "We sell them three times a year, the program really took off big time," said Seiber, who emphasized the need for residents to register for emergency notifications issued by Nixle as well as turning to Lafayette's AM 1670 emergency alert radio station during emergencies and the standardized Channel 123 that connects all of Lamorinda. CERT's Zoom and in-person meetings held on the second Monday night of each month inform and update people about the latest developments and conditions.

PG&E's presentation by Senior Public Safety Specialist Les Putnam and Public Affairs Representative Mark van Gorder brought out the most heat during the three-hour meeting. Following information regarding Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS), equipment maintenance and additions to the PG&E website aimed at improving communication with residents during emergencies, Council Member Cam Burks was not satisfied.

When Council Member Gina Dawson asked about transformers and other equipment failures, Putnam said such failures are "unfortunate parts of the system." A suggestion was made by van Gorder for residents to phone the PG&E 800 number and also to call and process a ticket with the city to report the date, time and location of equipment problems.

"My community doesn't want to hear about processing a ticket for another failure of your utility agency that has a track record of monumental failure in our community and throughout California for the last five to eight years," said Burks. "We don't want to hear, 'That's just how it is,' with infrastructure that's failed over the years."

He said the hubris of PG&E representatives' replies were "beyond reproach" and the community had very little trust in the utility company. He called their community response and utility company "broken."

Questions posed by members of the public - after Burks asked if the meeting was meant to serve the public or to be "a policy talk" - centered on fire mitigation activities in specific corridors in Lamorinda and oversight of fire code compliance for new developments.

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein said the efficacy of last year's fire mitigation efforts during "record breaking times" provide a snapshot glimpse of the future. A creek fire in August 2020 near Fresno was a single-ignition fire and resulted in 387,000 acres burned. It was the largest-ever single-ignition fire in California. With residents living in areas that used to be grassland, dairy farms and orchards, Rein said there is increasing risk to the Lafayette community and preparedness is ever more essential.

A key resource mentioned repeatedly throughout the meeting was the Lamorinda Residents Guide to Wildfire Preparedness and Evacuation, which can be picked up at the police department or the local library. Residents can register with ALERTWildfire and the Community Warning System, which can provide text alerts about emergencies, at <http://www.alertwildfire.org/southeastbay/> and <https://cwsalerts.com/>.

The meeting remains available for viewing on the City of Lafayette's YouTube Channel (www.youtube.com/channel/UCBPuox8U4xResMPv4T_bSJw). All of Lafayette's council members were present at the meeting.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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