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## EBMUD updates Orinda on drought, infrastructure and vegetation management

By Sora O'Doherty

Gone are the days when Orinda raged against the East Bay Municipal Utility District's failure to communicate, as back in 2017 concerning the fiasco over the Orchard Road detour. EBMUD directors showed up in full force on Sept. 7 to update the Orinda City Council about its operations in the city, which, according to EBMUD, is the heart of the East Bay water system. The update had been scheduled previously, but was postponed when a closed session ran extremely long.

Director Marguerite Young, representing Ward 3 which includes Orinda, Moraga, El Sobrante and portions of Pinole and Richmond, introduced the presentation. EBMUD serves approximately 1.4 million customers, she said, and its mission is to manage natural resources, provide reliable water and wastewater services, and to preserve and protect the environment for the public. "Our board hugs the watershed," she said, "and Orinda is the heart of EBMUD."

One of EBMUD's current priorities is the removal of dead Monterey pines that pose a fire hazard. Scott Hill, EBMUD manager of watershed and recreation, discussed the planned removal of 1,500 dead trees from San Pablo Reservoir that borders Orinda. The trees, mostly Monterey pines, can be found on nearly 300 acres. EBMUD has hired a contractor and is preparing to start right after nesting bird season ends on Sept. 15. EBMUD Associate Civil Engineer Jeff Bandy updated the council and public on the progress of infrastructure projects in Orinda. These projects include (with estimated completion dates) the Briones tower seismic retrofit (2022), the Duffel solar photovoltaic renewable energy project (2022-23), and the Happy Valley Pumping Plant at Miner Road and Camino Sobrante (2022-24).

A pipeline in the El Toyonal area was recently completed.

Additional infrastructure improvements are planned at the Orinda water treatment plant to improve disinfection, protect public health by adding a multi-barrier treatment process, and reduce the formation of disinfection byproducts. The Orinda water treatment plant is the only plant that runs 24/7, 365 days a year. The infrastructure plan includes the demolition of some existing buildings on the site located on Camino Pablo. One planned improvement is a generator for Public Safety Power Shutoffs, something that was found lacking during previous PSPSs.

Dave Briggs, director of operations and water management, said that 90% of its water comes from the central Sierras, and that fortunately there have been no wildfires in EBMUD's watershed. At 5,000 feet of elevation, there has been plenty of rain and snow, he said. EBMUD has five local reservoirs. Four reservoirs, San Pablo, Camino Pablo, Briones, and Upper San Leandro are used for the storage of water, while the Lafayette and one other are used primarily for recreation.

Briggs explained that full storage is about 640 acre feet of water, and showed a chart of how full reservoirs have been over recent years. During the very dry years in the past drought EBMUD started tapping the Sacramento River to minimize the impact. Since then, they've had several wet years, and some average water years. "It doesn't take a lot to fill our reservoirs," he reported, but last year was dry and this year is very dry. EBMUD is now down to 435 acre-feet of water storage. "It's been worse," Briggs said, "but it's very bad." A stage 1 drought was declared in April and EBMUD is pursuing supplemental supplies in about three weeks. EBMUD has asked for voluntary water conservation of about 10%. "Hopefully next winter will be wet," Briggs said, but EBMUD is in the process of acquiring additional water for the future.

Briggs suggested that homeowners irrigate efficiently and avoid high noon irrigation, find and fix leaks and be mindful of indoor use. Upon request, EBMUD will send you a kit, including water efficient fixtures, for free. He also discussed the lawn rebate program which offers from \$0.75 to \$1.50 per square foot for replacing lawns with landscaping that uses less water.

Council Member Inga Miller thanked EBMUD and praised the open-door relationship that director Theis helped build. Council Member Darlene Gee complimented the EBMUD staff and thanked them for all the recreational use at the EBMUD facilities, from which she said communities have benefited so much in such difficult times. EBMUD confirmed that they saw a huge increase at the Lafayette Reservoir and throughout its watershed. There were an estimated 1.2 million visitors last year.

During the pandemic, EBMUD stopped requiring trail permits, which has not been without its challenges enforcing social distancing and educating people. EBMUD also promised some upcoming changes that will increase access for folks. Scott Hill said EBMUD had doubled their number of annual permits in one month when the permit requirement was reinstated. He attributed this to a raised level of awareness. "Many people didn't realize what a jewel they had," he said. Lafayette is such a busy place and has remained busy during the pandemic. Young also confirmed that EBMUD didn't shut people's water off if they were having difficulty, and restored water to many customers to ensure that people have access to water.

The EBMUD presentation to the city council can be viewed at:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/0twaf3yhtpl1vlekpkpvaxt79uq7ieum>

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