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SSTOC issues initial report and recommendations to Orinda

By Sora O'Doherty

When Orinda voters passed Measure R in November 2020, it put big, but perhaps, subtle changes in play. Orinda residents agreed to tax themselves for two big goals: working on the city's roads, and, even more urgently, trying to make the city fire safe. The Citizens' Infrastructure Oversight Committee was replaced by the Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission (SSTOC), required by the measure to monitor how Orinda spent the new revenue.

In early 2021, the city council appointed 10 residents - Jud Hammon, Chairman; Chris Decareau; Melanie Light; Paula Reinman; Brad Barber; Yasaman Lee; Latika Malkani; Alex Weinstein, Rachelle Latimer and original member Kyle Arteaga, who moved out of the area and has not yet been replaced - to the SSTOC. At the Sept. 21 city council meeting on Zoom, Mayor Amy Worth remarked that it was the first time that she could recall when all the members of a commission were in attendance.

Since March 2021, the Commission has been meeting monthly in open public meetings. In addition, they held a half-day open public planning workshop to develop a focused work plan on reduction of wildfire risk and emergency preparedness, which featured presentations from several community partners, including MOFD Fire Chief Dave Winnacker and Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs, Lamorinda CERT, the Firewise Council, and the then-current Orinda police chief, David Cook. There was also a presentation about the wildfire risk mitigation plan developed by the City of Los Gatos.

The SSTOC presented the city council with two sets of recommendations, nine items for immediate or near-term action, and six items for long-term or multi-year consideration, with the following suggestions to be tackled first: The city should hire and train an additional dedicated staff member to provide "boots on the ground" support for wildfire risk reduction, emergency preparedness, and home hardening efforts; effect roadside fuel reduction and vegetation management, particularly along evacuation routes; create a vegetation and structure inventory of city and residential properties in order to utilize novel computer modeling of fire in the Wildland Urban Interface; continue to clear city property to comply with MOFD Fire Code, and budget and plan for annual clearance; and explore alternate funding to incentivize residents to achieve fuel reduction, home hardening, and emergency preparedness.

The six long-term goals the commission recommended are developing a matrix for success which includes periodic goals for residential compliance, a vegetation maintenance schedule and improved emergency preparedness, enhancing relations with agencies with overlapping interests, such as EBMUD, PG&E, East Bay Regional Parks, and Caltrans; educating landscapers, nurseries, and garden centers regarding Orinda regulations, standards and best practices, continuing to update city ordinances to reflect MOFD's continuing efforts to strengthen the Fire Code and Building Code; developing and implement a plan to help Orinda homeowners maintain affordable fire and hazard insurance; and adopting an environmental plan to address climate change locally.

Hammon said while the city is just getting started on fire safety, it must prepare for the high risk of a wildfire starting outside the city that could result in a deadly conflagration within the town. He expressed concern that many Orinda residents are not as well informed or prepared as they need to be and noted that there are three key goals: wildfire risk reduction, saving property and saving lives. "Orinda faces a situation not a lot different than Oakland 30 years ago."

In 1991 a large suburban wildland-urban interface conflagration on the hillsides of Orinda's neighbors, Oakland and Berkeley, killed 25 people and injured 150 others. The fire burned 1,520 acres, destroying over 3,000 homes and caused billions of dollars in economic loss. Council Member Inga Miller noted that one of the precursors of that fire was a severe frost that caused the die off of eucalyptus trees. She pointed to the current drought and die off of trees, noting that EBMUD is now working on removing dead and dying trees. She suggested outreach to the East Bay Regional Parks District and other nearby communities. Hammon said that while they have met with a number of organizations, it was not clear whether that was the role of the commission or the city.

Council Member Nick Kosla asked how the work on roads and drainage will intertwine with the work on fire safety, and Hammon responded that he expects the first two years of the commission's work to be devoted to fire safety. Vice Mayor Dennis Fay said that he attended virtually all the SSTOC meetings. He raised a concern that the city may not be able to enforce the MOFD code.

Hammon, addressing the compliance issue, said that voluntary compliance is the best, cheapest, and quickest way to implement the fire code. "We need a public-private partnership," he said, pointing out that Orinda is right over the hill from Berkeley, which is often an incubator for plans from the university staff or students. For example, UC Berkeley has a program to develop a computer program to model wildfire through the wildland-urban interface. It needs a lot of detail, he said, requiring private property owners to provide detailed information about what is on their land.

City manager David Biggs said that the state of California will be rolling out funding for low- and moderate-income housing to help with home hardening this coming January.

The entire report, including many links to resources, is available as part of the city council agenda at <http://orindaca.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=1936&Inline=True>

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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