

Published March 2nd, 2022

Council hears about Caltrans plans for maintaining Highway 24 corridor

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Sora O'Doherty

Another new element of Caltrans' maintenance plan is fuel reduction service contracts for work outside the traditional edge treatments. Normally, Caltrans would maintain 8 feet from the edge of the highway, but starting this year, Caltrans will be hiring contractors to provide fuel reduction work beyond what Caltrans would normally perform. These additional areas were identified, Casteel said, by local fire districts. In answer to questions from Lamorinda Weekly following the meeting, Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker said that for years Caltrans has sprayed chemical pre-emergent along the roadside to reduce the growth of annual grasses and weeds. MOFD has advocated to transition this spraying to mowing of grass, hand thinning of encroaching brush, limbing of healthy trees to maintain at least 6 feet of clearance above the ground, and removal of dead trees. "While more is always better from a fire safety standpoint, our advocacy has been limited to vegetation within 10 feet of the roadway as this is covered under the existing 1992 Caltrans EIR and the area where 74% of fires start (per Caltrans data)," Winnacker said.

During the council meeting, the question was raised whether Highway 24 was protected from having billboards by its status as a scenic highway. The answer was that while that is true so long as a highway is deemed to be scenic, changes in the environment of the highway might endanger its scenic status, and, in that case, billboards would become a possibility along the roadside.

Casteel laid out Caltrans' workflow. Beginning with a workshop on March 2, the annual vegetation control plan will be due on April 1. Annual tree inspections will follow in mid-June. Casteel compared the project to managing a really big farm. Caltrans is responsible for over 40,000 acres. The portion of Highway 24 that traverses Orinda is approximately four miles long.

Vice Mayor Inga Miller and Council Member Amy Worth both spoke about how important it is to the city of Orinda to maintain the scenic highway status for Highway 24, (as well as Highway 13, which was not under discussion). Miller said that she "wants to make sure that we know about anything that threatens the scenic highway rating for Highway 24 and that we take actions to maintain our visual corridor without billboards." Worth asked about the status of oak trees, to which Casteel replied that oak trees are a valued tree for Caltrans, and it wants to preserve them.

Worth agreed that oaks perform very well in fires, as opposed to non-native trees. She asked if the scenic highway designation precluded billboards. That question was taken up by Sheryl Sablan, Caltrans environmental maintenance office chief, who explained that it is all about maintaining the scenic character of the highway. "If we clear cut it, it would take us out of the scenic highway designation," she said. "That is one of the reasons why we don't want to do that."

Council Member Darlene Gee wondered about longer-term replacement of vegetation in addition to fuel reduction and maintenance, but she was referred to Caltrans' landscape architecture department for such inquiries.

Orinda Mayor Dennis Fay acknowledges the importance of using Highway 24 as a fire break. "It would be nice to know when you are going to do it, the time frame, which types of trees will be removed," he said, adding, "basically, what you are going to do and when you are going to do it." Casteel replied that after the preparation of a fuel reduction action plan by the contractor, a detailed list of work to be performed will be available. Caltrans is currently working through the process of selecting a contractor.

Chief Winnacker, in comments after the meeting, noted that "the California Streets and Highways Code does

not appear to address the removal of ground fuels and dead trees as grounds for revocation of the Scenic Highway designation. This has previously been stated by Caltrans' representatives, specifically that the scope of work they are undertaking would not be grounds for a review of Highway 24's inclusion in Section 263.3 of the Streets and Highway Code."

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA