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## Lafayette gets Firewise

By Sharon K. Sobotta



ConFire Fire Inspector Taylor King advises Lafayette City Council Member Wei-Tai Kwok to keep bushes and shrubs trimmed well below 3-4 feet when trees are above. Photo Violet Hsu

ended up with 23," Kwok says. "It's a pretty low bar. You commit to spending an hour a year assessing and addressing fire risks around your home."

Kwok says there are more than 20 Firewise communities in the Orinda and Moraga area and he's hoping Lafayette can have at least 10 Firewise communities by the end of 2022. So far there are four.

In February, Kwok and his neighbors arranged to have Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Fire Inspector Taylor King walk through and assess risks. Kwok says it was an illuminating experience, not just for him, but for his neighbors as well.

"I spent an hour clearing out my rosemary bushes, which are very flammable, so technically I can be done with my hour for the year. But I'll keep going because I still have so many things to take care of," Kwok says, while pointing out various plants and vegetation the fire inspector recommended he mitigate. Still, this isn't as intimidating of a process as it may sound. "All fire safety tips are offered as recommendations and then you can decide what is manageable or even collaborate with neighbors to problem solve."

Kwok says it's important that residents are not in denial about potential wildfires. "Over the past five years, we've seen wildfires in California getting closer and closer to us. Santa Rosa is a suburban community with few trees, and closer still, we had the Lafayette Tennis Club on fire a few years ago," Kwok recalls. "I think PG&E turned off 85% of the power in the city, but not in that area and there was a fire. Thankfully the fire and police were able to extinguish it, but we would be foolish to think that it can't happen to us."

Jack Baker moved to Lafayette last summer to be closer to his daughter and grandchildren. "When I first moved here, I saw that my daughter had a big sign near her home that said Firewise," Baker recalls. "I was aware of it and then started talking about it with Wei-Tai, who arranged the community meeting and a lot of people signed up."

Baker took advantage of the fire inspector's visit to his community and while he wasn't surprised by the findings and recommendations for his particular property, he did gain some insight. "I learned specifics. The irony is that I had a tree service scheduled for the next day. We were planning to clear out trees, but we expanded a little bit to address some of the additional concerns the fire inspector brought to our attention."

In addition to learning about practical things like the recommendation not to have greenery or flammable materials within five feet of his home, Baker learned about structural matters like how to fireproof a wooden staircase. Baker says he's sharing in the cost of removing a few large oak trees (which is something he committed to even before the Firewise community walk-through). "Nobody has to do anything, but we're educating ourselves about what we can do. That, to me, makes it a very valuable program."

Irene Jorgenson has lived in her Lafayette home for 22 years. After doing the neighborhood walk-through with the fire inspector, Jorgenson is thinking about some concrete ways to be a better neighbor. "The most important thing I learned is that we have plants that are highly flammable and we didn't know that," Jorgenson says. "The plants are right next to our neighbor's only exit from their house so it presents a huge safety issue for our neighbors. Jorgenson says it's not a matter of if but how she'll address the issue. "The thought of a rapid fire is terrifying to anyone. It wouldn't be right for me to be made aware of how to

At certain times Lafayette Council Member Wei-Tai Kwok and his wife Violet fear for their lives when they go to sleep in their home which is just a short uphill walk from the Lafayette BART station. It's not home invasions or crime that they fear. It's California wildfires.

Kwok, who is professionally and personally committed to the issues of environmental sustainability and climate change, has been living with the gravity of that since his (wife Violet's) cousins lost everything except the shoes on their feet and their wallets during the 2017 Tubbs Fire in Santa Rosa. This prompted Kwok to reach out to the people in his neighborhood about forming a Firewise community. Firewise is a national fire prevention and preparedness program. Firewise communities of at least eight residents from respective neighborhoods are dedicated to the common cause of reducing the risk and potential spread of wildfires.

"I reached out to my neighbors hoping to get eight families to sign up (to learn about the program) and we

address the issue and do nothing about it," she says. "We're going to meet with our neighbors (to find a creative solution) because it's not only a safety issue, but also a privacy issue."

Firewise pamphlets are sent out to the Lafayette community periodically. In terms of renters or residents of apartments who may not always get such items, they are available at the police department. Kwok says the 30% of Lafayette residents who are renters can also participate in the program. "Renters should talk to each other first and then their landlords to see what can be done. Fire safety is in everyone's best interest."

Some things everyone can do are mitigate or eliminate vegetation within five feet of homes and uplimb trees so that branches are at least six feet above the ground, and also think ahead. The city of Lafayette has 17 evacuation zones. "Along with doing what we can to make our community firewise," Kwok says, "everyone should sign up for the community warning system which sends out text notifications in the event of an emergency."

To learn more about the Firewise program, visit the National Fire Protection Agency's website at NFPA.org.

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