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Orinda looks to other counties for emergency preparedness inspiration

By Sora O'Doherty

How is Orinda doing on clearing roadside vegetation? How should homeowners be encouraged to comply with the new fire code? Which is better, the carrot or the stick? Do other counties have the answers? These were some of the questions considered by the Orinda City Council and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District at a joint meeting on March 16. MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker reviewed the requirements of the new fire code. He stressed that MOFD seeks voluntary compliance, and that priority is given to evacuation routes.

City Manager David Biggs noted that the city has the ability to enforce rules for traffic purposes, but not for fire purposes. He added that he has spoken with Assembly Member Rebecca Bauer-Kahan and Sen. Steve Glazier to see if there could be a legislative fix that would allow the city to have a greater role in enforcing the fire code.

Council Member Darlene Gee asked if there are areas or places where clearance of vegetation is considered a problem, to which Winnacker responded that Orinda is very far from having taken care of the vegetation problem. "Very few neighborhoods have achieved clearance," he stated. Biggs did add that the city has addressed property it owns, and has institutionalized the deadline to assure compliance each year.

Council Member Amy Worth asked about the fire district's plan, what is the strategy for dealing with homes on high-priority evacuation routes? Winnacker replied that the district will send out early notifications to all residents, but those on evacuation routes will get targeted notifications.

The district will shift from its current chipping efforts to inspections and sending out violation notices, which will include language about maintenance of evacuation routes if the property is located on one. However, he added, "I have met with the owners of some parcels in their driveways, and their property is still not in compliance.

"We are willing to enforce," he said, "especially on evacuation routes." Postcards will go out in April, personalized letters will go out to those on evacuation routes in May, and enforcement will begin on June 1. In terms of enforcement, Vice Mayor Inga Miller noted that she had heard that there has been some non-voluntary work performed and paid for by MOFD, with liens being placed on properties. Winnacker agreed that there have been some cases, but very few.

Paula Reinman, a member of the Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission, joined the meeting to comment that she had just spoken with Rich Shortall, executive coordinator of Fire Safe Marin. He said that the most effective thing that they are doing is a home evaluation program run through the fire district, with home inspections being conducted by uniformed staff. She reported that Shortall said that this has driven compliance more than anything else they have done.

Winnacker said that MOFD has a very similar program with volunteers that is up and running. The volunteers wear vests, and it is a more effective program, he said, coming from a trusted source, a friend or a neighbor. The program will be expanded in the future. However, he emphasized that it is really important that homeowners receive consistent messages from the same person every time. "Any inconsistency," he noted, "becomes just one more item to be used to avoid doing the work."

MOFD Director Craig Jorgens added that MOFD also helps neighbors with Firewise councils. Biggs wondered how Orinda can get more Firewise communities, how the city and the fire district might help to encourage that. Worth suggested that if the goal is to increase compliance, the city and the fire district should pursue joint communication tools to maximize the message.

The meeting concluded with a determination to work more closely together, perhaps with the creation of a 2x2 committee of the Orinda City Council and MOFD, as Orinda has with the school board. Council Member Nick Kosla also favored more joint meetings, and MOFD President Michael Donner suggested that more than annual meetings are needed. Mayor Dennis Fay suggested that they create the 2x2 committee, let them work, then schedule another joint meeting.

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