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Orinda makes parking restrictions on red flag days permanent, may expand scope

By Sora O'Doherty



Image provided

The Orinda City Council has judged that the pilot program to prevent cars being parked on El Toyonal and Loma Vista on red flag days has been a success and has adopted the program on a permanent basis. Residents of other areas asked the council to consider extending such a requirement to their neighborhoods, and the council indicated that they will consider expanding the scope of the red flag day parking restrictions. (The item was agendized for June 7, but was too late for publication in this issue.)

Red Flag Days are declared by the National Weather Service when there is low relative humidity and high winds, or very low humidity for more than 10 hours, or widespread and/or significant dry lightning. The fire chief may also declare a red flag day in response to an extreme hazard.

It is anticipated there are likely to be between 20 and 30 red flag days each year. Residents subject to the parking restrictions can find out if it is a red flag day by referring to street signs posted along the route that can be flipped

open when the red flag day is declared. Information is also posted on the National Weather Service (NWS) website, <https://www.weather.gov/>.

Red Flag notices will generally be sent as "until further notice" with a cancellation notice in the future. Plumbers, gardeners and repair vehicles are allowed 5 minutes of active loading and unloading in the red flag day parking prohibition area.

The city pointed out that, no matter how reasonable the justification may seem, creating a potential blockage in the street on days of extreme hazard is unacceptable for the entire community. Therefore, people who live in the zone would have to provide alternative parking for their vehicles if they are on vacation at a time when red flag days are likely. Alternatively, neighbors could cooperate to move vehicles.

By the same token, people with no off-street parking and disabled people are still expected to comply with the parking restrictions on red flag days. The effect of the restrictions is to prohibit stopping or parking while red flag warnings are in effect within 5 feet from the edge of the city paved roadway along both sides of El Toyonal starting from the eastern edge of Camino Pablo, ending at the intersection of Vista Del Orinda, as well as both sides of Loma Vista Drive.

Residents will be given a warning if they were parked illegally on the first red flag day. After the first red flag day, enforcement will begin immediately, with violators being given citations.

Residents will be notified by postcard of the parking restrictions at the beginning of each fire season, and by red flag warning alert signs posted at specific locations.

During public comment on the item, Gene Gottfried said, "I think the most important thing to be remembered is that real progress can only be evaluated during an evacuation. There were plenty of cars parked on El Toyonal before the parking ban, virtually none after. The ban has been very, very well enforced," Gottfried continued, "and there has been no resistance to it." Gottfried was one of several community members who recommended that the council consider extending the ban, especially on narrow winding streets.

Don Moresi from Hillcrest Drive said he was a firefighter for 26 years, including serving in the Oakland fire. He experienced two occasions of complete street blockages when firefighters had to push vehicles off the road. Sue Wecht, Firewise leader in Orinda Downs, suggested, "This is a serious problem which could result in loss of life or property. It should be extended to all areas of Orinda where fire department vehicles would not be able to gain access."

Melanie Light, chair of the Orinda Firewise Council, said, "I am so pleased to see this on the docket tonight. The only complaint I've heard is that it's not enforced enough. I really hope you expand; I hope you do it in conjunction with evacuation groups." She added that she hopes that the council will allow neighborhoods to petition for red flag days parking restrictions.

Ken Light added, "I wish that the council would move quicker. Think back to the Oakland Hills fire when 25 people died. You need to move faster. This is really critical. We're in a crisis with climate change and drought." He noted that "on swim nights you'd never get a fire engine through."

Matt Fogarty expanded the scope of the conversation, commenting, "I'd like the council to recognize that wild fire is a global problem owing to climate change. It's bad and it's going to get worse. We have a lot of responsibility." He concluded that he hopes the council "will do something about reducing our emissions as a community."

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