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Lamorinda suffers storm damage, but dodges major devastation

By Sora O'Doherty, Vera Kochan, Jennifer Wake



Self serve sandbag station at corner of Mt Diablo Boulevard at Village Center Drive in Lafayette
 Ripped storm drain inlet flooded roadway at Bollinger Canyon Road
 Public Works Director Mike Moran inspects segment of storm damaged shoulder of St. Mary's Road near Driftwood Drive
 San Pablo Creek behind the Orinda Post Office near where its banks during the height of the winter storms in early January.
 Landslides - Painted Rock debris fell onto Rheem Boulevard

Heavy showers of rain and strong winds created problems in Lamorinda in the first weeks of 2023. Fortunately, the area did not suffer from the extreme damage, including fatalities, experienced elsewhere in California. However, the area did experience landslides both on private and public property as well as downed trees and power lines, and all three jurisdictions declared a state of emergency.

The city of Lafayette proclaimed a local state of emergency on Jan. 4. "This allows us greater flexibility to contract for work, document damage, and ask for reimbursement from the federal government should funds become available," City Manager Niroop Srivatsa explained at the Jan. 9 council meeting. As of Friday, Jan. 6 Lafayette had distributed over 6,000 sand bags, Orinda handed out 8,000 sand bags and 60 tons of sand as of Jan. 10, and Moraga also distributed a large

number of sand bags.

"Diamond K opened their doors on New Year's Day and really helped the public," Srivatsa said at the council meeting, noting that the city staffed two sand bag stations, which have been replenished every day.

There were mud slides and debris flows at Pleasant Hill Road and Deer Hill Road, a slide in the upper baseball field at Community Park, the Lafayette Community Center had some leaks in the roof, there was a failed drain pipe at the creek at Victoria Court, potholes required repair throughout Lafayette, and a storm drain at Orchard Road caused some flooding. A slide below St. Mary's Road along Las Trampas Creek (the west side of the road approximately 310 feet south of Driftwood Drive) put the structural integrity of St. Mary's Road at risk. Staff had a contractor place some rip rap at the base of the slide and up into the scarp as an interim stabilization measure and the council released \$50,000 from the Emergency Response Fund 011-360.861 to complete this work. "Crews are working around the clock, working weekends as well," Srivatsa said. "Thanks to everyone for pitching in and helping out."

Moraga's Interim Town Manager Brian Dolan on Jan. 4 proclaimed a local emergency. A Jan. 11 staff report to the town council by Public Works Director/Town Engineer Shawn Knapp, Moraga Police Chief Jon King, and Dolan stated they "found conditions of extreme peril to the safety of persons and property had arisen within the town caused by storms, resulting in heavy rainfall, flooding, landslides, strong wind gusts, downed trees and power outages, which began December 27, 2022." Council members wasted no time in unanimously ratifying Dolan's proclamation.

The town has suffered a kaleidoscope of damage throughout its boundaries. Problems included localized flooding on Moraga Road and Canyon Road; landslides at Bollinger Canyon Road, Painted Rock's debris onto Rheem Boulevard, and Mulholland Ridge above Camino Ricardo and Ashbrook Place; Laguna Creek's overflow and flooding at Hacienda Park and the Pavilion building (which also suffered electrical and HVAC issues), along with leaking roofs at the Hacienda and La Sala buildings; the Town Offices experienced roof leaks and HVAC issues; Moraga Library also has roof leaks; loss of electricity to the Town Hall buildings and most of the Hacienda; residents experienced power loss due to fallen trees in various neighborhoods; and Pacific Gas and Electric transformer issues.

When asked whether the town should worry about any storm drain damage or failures under Moraga's roads (see Lamorinda Weekly's Nov. 23, 2022 article: "State of some Moraga storm drains causes alarm"), Knapp replied, "We are in better standing than we've been in a long time, because we've been doing repairs and maintenance. We've cleared the majority of our bad pipes. Time will tell how we fare."

During the past weeks, town staff personnel have been stretched to the limit day and night with MPD responding to emergency calls. The Parks and Recreation Department did their best to control flooding in the Hacienda's buildings. MOFD's Dispatch Non-Emergency line experienced an up-tick in calls, but most of them were fallen-tree related, to which the callers were referred to Moraga's exceptionally beleaguered Public Works Department. Not only was it all-hands-on-deck for public works, even Knapp and Public Works/Parks Maintenance Manager Kyle Salvin showed up with shovels and rakes to clear collected debris from storm drains on New Year's Eve. "We were running from one situation to another and making calls to set up barricades as needed," stated Knapp. "People were calling the town offices, or MPD, or using the Mobile Moraga app to report problems."

With limited equipment and man-power in battling Mother Nature, the town engaged local companies Bay Area Drainage, David D. Dunn Company, and Site Works to help with the emergency clearing of public streets and storm drain inlets. They also provided erosion control measures. The Public Works budget for this type of expenditure is only \$16,000, which will not come close to covering the anticipated cleanup cost from the series of storms.

Knapp explained that Moraga can take advantage of two sources of funding. Gov. Gavin Newsom proclaimed a state of emergency which directed Caltrans to request immediate assistance through the Federal Highway Administration's Emergency Relief Program (FEMA) to provide monetary support with local road repairs, technical support, recovery efforts and flood-fighting materials. This allows for the potential to receive state funds. Contra Costa County will help to organize a simulation of costs that will get turned over to the state, which in turn will pass the information onto FEMA to determine each county's funding eligibility.

In Orinda, Charles Hill Road remained closed until early morning on Jan. 11. Orinda City Manager David Biggs, who adopted a local state of emergency on Jan. 6, mainly to get funding, said at the Jan. 10 council meeting, "We've had some minor slides in Orinda Oaks, a slide in Wilder, and one on Miner Road. Some utility poles blew down as well." Biggs also reported some slides on public property. Each storm, he said, brings different issues and levels of concerns. He reported that Public Works has really been out there, as well as Parks & Rec and the Orinda Police Department. City staff was coordinating with the Fire District. The public works crew is only four people, supplemented with contract services. "There had been a lot of competition for resources," he said. "Wave after wave of storms doesn't allow us to get some routine drain cleaning, and mudslides are top priority."

Biggs appealed for help and patience from residents. "If you see something, please let us know. During business hours residents can call the city at 925-253-4231 after business hours they are asked to call the Orinda Police non-emergency line at 925-284-5010. Dispatch will also call in Orinda public work responders," he said. "Every set of eyes helps us get ahead of the curve." He asked residents to be sure to sign up for Nixle and the county warning system.

The area around Sanders Drive and Larch Avenue in Moraga suffered numerous trees downed by high winds on the night of Jan. 9. Large trees fell across Cortes Court and Larch Avenue. A large tree on the campus of nearby St. Monica's' church cracked and fell into the parking lot. Residents of one home on Sanders Drive heard what they thought was a crack of thunder in the night, only to awake in the morning to find that the top half of a tall redwood tree in their backyard had broken off and crashed through their roof where it overhangs the patio. Resident Eleanor Vaughn said that she was amazed that the wind blew the tree at an angle, preventing it from crashing through their bedroom.

Her neighbor, a retired arborist, put her in touch with a crew who came and promptly cleared the fallen tree. By early morning, PG&E had teams out working on electricity lines that were brought down by falling trees.

On the morning of Dec. 31, a clog in a drainage line above Descanso Drive in Orinda created a flow of water and mud down the public street which caused some damage to driveways along the street. The problem was reported to the city and to the Contra Costa County Sheriff at about 7:30 in the morning. In the late afternoon, first one truck from public works and then a team from a contractor cleared the clog in a major drain and pulled off a trash grate that had accumulated debris.

Director of Public Works Scott Christie is interested in pursuing improvements, but noted that the city has very limited resources, and an email received on Dec. 31 was the first written complaint about Descanso Drive he was aware of. "Our response was not perfect," he said when interviewed, "but we were able to get things working better." He explained that big storms "really do push beyond the basic capacity of the system," adding, "I think the system is reasonably designed; sure, if we had unlimited funds we could build a system that could support a 100-year storm."

San Pablo Creek in downtown Orinda did rise above its banks at one point, but, although there was a tremendous flow of water, the creek mainly was able to contain it. On a positive note, a number of river otters were spotted by a member of Friends of Orinda Creeks having fun in San Pablo Creek on Jan. 9.



Flooding at Hacienda Park's Pavilion building Photo courtesy Moraga Public Works Department

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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