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Two Orinda homes lost in landslide, government help uncertain



Photos courtesy city of Orinda

By Sora O'Doherty

After winter storms dropped an unprecedented amount of rain on Lamorinda, two homes on Cedar Lane in Orinda have been red-tagged as unsafe for occupancy. On the night of Jan. 18, the residence at 14 Cedar Lane started to slide down the steep hill behind the house. In the days that followed, residents of the destroyed homes would find that damage caused by landslides is not covered by most home insurance policies, and that help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency will only be available to private individuals if Contra Costa County as a whole reaches a certain threshold of storm-related damage.

According to Emily Barnett, Contra Costa County Central Sanitation Communications and Government Relations Manager, Central San got a call in the evening of the landslide.

Occupancy on Jan. 21, and the house was also red-tagged. Residents of both homes have safely relocated, according to the city, which released a statement on Jan. 23, noting that it is "coordinating with numerous agencies from the County Building Department to utility providers and the County Office of Emergency Services." The city has also enlisted a geotechnical engineering consultant who determined that Cedar Lane is safe to drive. The consultant will continue to monitor the stability of the public road.

The city asked those who are not visiting a specific home on Cedar Lane to postpone visits to a future date. The city also said that key staff are meeting daily to review imagery from the site and to coordinate patrols and inter-agency communication. The outpouring of caring for fellow Orindans is heartwarming and in response to those asking

whelmed by your support over the last few days. Our family is safe and we are doing our best to navigate the unknown. A huge thank you to all of you for your care, concern and for the donations. We greatly appreciate all of the support."

Resident Carol Sebelia was shocked to find that assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency will only be available to private individuals if the county of Contra Costa reaches a threshold amount of damage from the storm. The city of Orinda has urged residents who did sustain damage to follow the link to Contra Costa County's online fillable form allowing private property owners to report storm-related damage on their private property. This information is essential to the county's effort to access federal aid for private property owners within Contra Costa County. The Sebelia family has lived in their home for 25 years. They briefly

stayed with friends before moving to a place in Rossmore. Sebelia said that she is not sure that the property can be fixed. She believes that "excess rain water suddenly gushed like a river downhill and broke the Morrissey's iron piers and their house and the river wiped out our driveway retaining wall, fence, and more." She also noted that they do not want a GoFundMe campaign established on their behalf.

In response to a question from The Lamorinda Weekly regarding possible assistance to the families, Rich Kovar, Emergency Services Manager of the Contra Costa County's Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services responded, saying FEMA and Cal OES damage inspectors would be in Orinda on Sunday and Monday to inspect the reported storm impacts on private property throughout the county. "While there is no guarantee that we as a county will meet the federal threshold, this is a positive step. We will have a definitive answer on the Individual assistance qualifications." He added, "At this time, I am not aware of any available resources. We have requested that Cal OES set up a Local Assistance Center to bring together public, private, and nonprofit resources. This center will include federal, state, and private sector resources with experience and can share options outside the existing federal recovery programs. This may provide more clarity

on available options. If all works out, this LAC will happen sometime next week."

City Administrative Services Director Douglas Alessio said that city staff had held a meeting with staff from Congressman Mark Desaulnier's office and representatives from FEMA and Cal OES. He stated that there is no "bright line" amount of damage that qualifies individuals in a county for individual help from FEMA, but that the upcoming inspections should determine if that threshold is met.

He mentioned the possibility of low interest loans of up to \$200,000 per household for building repairs and potential structural and personal grants of up to \$41,000 per household.

The GoFundMe campaign to aid the Morrissey family can be found at:

<https://gofund.me/40d27df5>

The form for reporting storm-related damage in the county can be found at: Contra Costa County Storm Damage Reporting Form.

As of Jan. 30 Kovar said that the inspections were ongoing, but that Contra Costa County had qualified for the Small Business Association Loan Program because Santa Clara and Alameda Counties had qualified. However the determination on the Individual Assistance program, which would open up both state and federal assistance, had not yet been made.



A collapsed garage sits at the end of this driveway on Cedar Lane.

Photo Sora O'Doherty

Upon inspection, it was found that the mudslide had dislodged a small offshoot pipe and mud had covered the maintenance access. Because residents would be without sewer service, and it would have been too dangerous for Central San workers to attempt the repairs in the dark, residents of three homes were offered accommodation in a local hotel. Central San was able to complete the work by 1 p.m. the following afternoon, and those residents were able to return to their homes. Barnett noted that the residents were "really appreciative and really very nice and kind to us."

Only 14 Cedar Lane was red tagged initially and neighboring 10 Cedar Lane was yellow tagged. However, as the land continued to slide, the city of Orinda deemed 10 Cedar Lane to also be unsafe for oc-

what they can do, the city urged residents who have sustained damage to report it to Contra Costa County.

Ava and Lisa Jackson organized a GoFundMe campaign to help the Morrissey family, who lost their home in the landslide. They set a goal of \$80,000 to help the family recover from catastrophic damage to their home. "Thankfully the family of four got out safely, but sadly the house is unrecoverable. The family has lived in the house for 12 years and they are devastated that their home and land are destroyed. We are raising funds initially to help provide short-term accommodation and cover the cost of cleanup." Within a few days, the campaign raised more than \$78,000.

Lexi Morrissey responded on behalf of the family, saying, "We are humbled and over-

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