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Orinda expands grants program to residents of all streets for fuel reduction

By Sora O'Doherty

Maybe it was the very wet winter, but for some reason, the grants of up to \$600 to match expenses for fuel reduction on properties on evacuation routes in Orinda had an infinitesimal uptake, with only two applicants for the grants. In an effort to promote fuel reduction, the Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission (SSTOC) recommended that the City Council adopt a resolution making the grant program more widely available. After a lengthy discussion, the council voted to expand the grant program to all Orinda streets and to extend it to August.

The original grant pilot program had a number of restrictions for applicants. Only parcels located on evacuation routes were eligible, and, in addition, such parcels needed to either be within a designated Firewise community or the owner must have availed of the Fire Adapted Community Assessment offered by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District or have received an MOFD notice that the property was not in compliance with the fire code.

In an effort to encourage residents to apply for the grants, the SSTOC recommended that the council remove the restriction to properties on evacuation routes and expand grant availability to "fire apparatus roads," which essentially includes all roads in Orinda, public and private, upon which MOFD vehicles might travel.

Rachel Latimer, a member of the SSTOC, attended the meeting to inform the council of the SSTOC's views. She said that it was the wish of the SSTOC to broaden the grant program and to encourage as many people as possible to take advantage of it.

There was a very wide-ranging council discussion on the specific SSTOC recommendation, as well as other ways to promote fire-safety in the community. The council considered either doing nothing at this point in the pilot program and seeing what the future would bring, adopting the SSTOC recommendations, or eliminating even further restrictions on the grant program. After extensive discussion, the council did decide to adopt the SSTOC's recommendation expanding the grant program to essentially all Orinda property owners, with an additional request the SSTOC consider reducing the restrictions even further and return to the council with more recommendations.

During the discussion, Council Member Janet Riley said at first that she would like to see a really good job on the evacuation routes. Mayor Inga Miller initially pushed for the city to have the right to photograph work done on private property under the grant program, but was later persuaded that this would be a great disincentive to grant applications as people might view this as an invasion of their privacy. Vice Mayor Darlene Gee advised the council to just accept the SSTOC recommendation without further expansion. "We don't want to start lopping things off prematurely," she said, adding that the council can always return to the matter in the future.

Council Member Latika Malkani pointed out that wildfire embers don't recognize any boundaries and said, in the case of wildfires "it's really an all-for-one and one-for-all" situation. Miller raised the issue of the restriction on gifts of public funds, but city attorney Osa Wolff pointed out that what is require to counter such a charge is a public benefit, and, at the end of the discussion, she noted that the council had expressed many public benefits arising from the grant program.

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