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Orinda Council updated on Miner Road contraflow exercise

By Sora O'Doherty

On April 30, the Orinda City Council received an update on the contraflow traffic system on Miner Road, including an exercise conducted in December of last year. The exercise showed that some people were not deterred by signs from turning against the flow of traffic when the contraflow was in force. City Manager David Biggs, who is also the Emergency Management Director, concluded that more education is necessary to get people to realize what the contraflow system is and how it works, as well as deploying staff to manage the intersections along Miner Road to prevent anyone from turning in the wrong direction. The contraflow system was conceived by the Moraga Orinda Fire Department and designed to enable Miner Road to function as a one way street in the event of an emergency evacuation being necessary. The idea for such contraflow systems arose from the tragic fate of places like Paradise where many people died trying to get out of the way of a raging wildfire where there was only a single road leading to the place. Miner Road is an arterial route in Orinda which is also deemed an evacuation route. On Dec. 2, the city conducted an exercise intended to see how quickly the one way system could be set up and how successful it might be. According to the update to the council, the results were mixed. The most successful aspect of the exercise was deploying a trailer that had been stocked with with all the necessary signage for the counterflow. As a result, set up was quickly, taking only 15 minutes to place signs at all intersections along Miner Road from Lombardy Lane to Camino Pablo. Once the signage was in place, the exercise lasted for 45 minutes.

Unfortunately, the exercise did not prove to be 100% successful, with some residents turning the wrong way onto Miner Road, despite the signs. Council member Janet Riley wondered if the language on the signs, which read, "Reverse lane in effect when indicated," and "Reverse lane in effect," with a no turn arrow, might not have communicated clearly to drivers. She strongly suggested that more forceful language is required, such as "Danger, Keep Out!" or something like that. The danger is that, in the event of an actual evacuation, if one car turns the wrong way it would most likely lead to an accident that would severely impact the flow of cars using the evacuation route, perhaps affecting thousands of people.

When the signs were placed in the middle of a road, they failed to stop drivers from turning in either direction. City Manager David Biggs opined that the only effective way to prevent people from turning onto Miner Road in opposition to the one-way flow of evacuation traffic was to have a person, be it a staff member or a member of Orinda Police Department, standing in the intersection to direct traffic.

Biggs confirmed that when called upon to return to Orinda in the event of an emergency, most staff could make it back within a half an hour. In the event of a fire, Biggs stated, the city would call staff back to the city, as well as getting mutual aid from neighboring areas. Council Member Inga Miller, who participated in the December exercise, agreed that only staff can control drivers from turning the wrong way onto Miner Road when contraflow is in effect.

The permanent signs are solar powered and are checked monthly by city staff to make sure that they do work.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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