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Council considers whether red flag day parking restrictions are too much

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda residents shared their opinions on signage and parking prohibitions on red flag days with the City Council on Jan. 23. The council accepted the input and deferred making any decisions on the issue, asking staff to do some further research and bring the matter back at a later date.

Assistant Engineer Kevin McCourt presented the staff report and gave a brief history of the program. He explained that fire season is now from June to November, and although there may be as many as 20 to 30 red flag days per year, over the past two years there have been only about 14 events, with only one last year.

The red flag day parking program was originally started as a pilot, then put into place on a permanent basis on El Toyonal. The program prohibits street parking on red flag days when the danger of fire is severe and evacuations may be required. After the pilot program was successfully implemented, the city council requested staff to expand the program based on the evacuation routes for northern Orinda.

In July 2022 the council approved red flag sign installations on key evacuation routes. Since then, according to the staff report, issues have been raised regarding the need for red flag day restrictions on Dalewood, the number and types of signs on Miner Road and other streets in the expanded area, the criteria used to expand the program, and how evacuation routes are defined. The current evacuation routes were established as part of the Safety Element update approved Jan. 31, 2023.

In public comment on the expanded program, the first commenter opined that the program should be terminated and existing signs should be removed. Flipping the signs on red flag days is a waste of staff time and placing signs where parking at any time is impossible were also cited as a waste of time and money.

Liz Boyle raised the issue of signs being flipped on Dalewood on Christmas Eve, when there was no fire danger. "I don't know how it happened," she said, but it took days to get the sign flipped back up, and other signs were flipped on Happy Valley and Sundown Terrace in late December.

Lisa Rudolf stated that while she didn't "want to beat a dead horse," the red flag warning signs had been requested by residents on El Toyonal following a community forum, but she said that there was no forum and Dalewood residents did not request the signs. "Very few people park on Dalewood," she added, "and if there is a fire heading towards Dalewood there won't be any cars parked there."

Sandy Pearson of Miner Road said she was a strong supporter of the program, especially on El Toyonal. However, she suggested that perhaps Honey Hill Road, Charles Hill Road, and others should not be included. She said that no one parks on these streets, and there has never been a parking problem. She noted that there are now a large number of signs. While on El Toyonal there are 28 signs over two miles, she said that Honey Hill has 40 signs in just half a mile. "You can see three to four signs in an area where there is virtually no place to pull off the road," she added. Council Member Inga Miller noted that it is very hard when the city makes something different, but she wanted to look at the big picture. "How do we prevent fire? How do we evacuate if there is a fire?" she asked. "Evacuation is within our control," she said, "and it is a matter of life and death." She pointed out that tragedy struck on very wide roads in Lahaina, and brought some photographs she had taken in Bronson Canyon, an area of Los Angeles that resembles Orinda, and has red flag day restrictions.

Council Member Brandyn Iverson said that it was very frustrating when the signs were going up. "I hope we can prioritize safety and evacuation," she said, "and when something doesn't make sense, we can not waste taxpayer dollars with signs that don't actually keep anybody safer." She suggested that the city add "one more layer of common sense, so that we don't repeat mistakes," but also said that fire safety must be the priority and "we can't have a town hall street by street."

Council Member Janet Riley agreed that the number one goal is evacuation, and suggested that the number of signs could be reduced, even if that might affect the legality of enforcing the parking restrictions. Council Member Latika Malkani agreed that further conversation was required, and suggested that the issue be discussed in the 2x2 meeting between the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the city. She also said that she didn't care if someone doesn't pay a citation fine, but that citations have a deterrent effect.

Mayor Darlene Gee said that she is willing to revisit the criteria used to implement the red flag day restrictions. "We all know what we are trying to achieve," she said, adding, "We don't care about the citations; what we are trying to prevent is a catastrophe. We need to work with staff, to assure the community that we can work on this." Concluding that "I don't want us to grab signs tomorrow, but to revisit the issue." The mayor asked staff to bring the matter back before the council at a later day, with the agreement of the council.

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[back](#)

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