



Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire District

Board of Directors
Wednesday, Feb. 15, 7 p.m.
Go to the website for meeting location, times and agendas. Visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors

Tuesday, Feb. 14, 1:30 p.m.
Board Chamber room 107,
Administration Building,
651 Pine St., Martinez
For meeting times and agendas,
visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

Development heating up for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District

By Nick Marnell

Fire Marshal Kathy Leonard runs the Moraga-Orinda Fire District inspection division and business is booming. "The growth is nice, but..." she said, and as she dug through her drawers of files and maps and pulled out two 4-inch thick environmental review documents for evidence, her nonverbal follow-up was clear: Leonard is very busy.

"The projects can take years start to finish," Leonard said, and since people want to build now, after a lull during the Great Recession, at least a dozen developments reside on the books in the district approval process. She found time between her plan reviews and building inspections to outline the challenges the district faces with some of these new developments.



Some new developments in Lamorinda had streets widened to accommodate engines.

Photo Andy Scheck

Summerhill Homes' Bellavista project on Rheem Boulevard is on hold until the road dries out. Nothing more has been done there beyond installation of a temporary water supply the district approved for two model homes. "We also required clear access through the detour to be able to take care of emergencies, like worker injuries and incidents at the other homes," Leonard said, which illustrates the main reason for the ordinances and the fire code: public safety, including that of the firefighters.

In a large development like Wilder in Orinda, there must be at least one point for emergency vehicle access. "We have to have a way to get in, the gate must be locked and the road paved. The road may also be used for an evacuation," Leonard said. She described a proposed building near the Wilder subdivision that offered no rear access for a fire engine. The project was denied. "Firefighter safety is a huge piece of this job," she said.

Access presented problems for two other Orinda developments. The road into J and J Ranch did not meet a fire code requirement that calls for easy access to vegetation behind the homes, but the neighborhood did not want to make any of the necessary improvements. "We demand a reasonable degree of fire safety, and the developer fi-

nally agreed to bring the road up to code," Leonard said.

The eight-lot subdivision at the end of Lavenida Lane required extensive work as the steep road at the top of the driveways initially left no room for a turnaround, and fire equipment cannot back down a hill. MOFD also added a fire hydrant at the top of the driveway and had to increase the size of the water main to allow a higher flow because the project lies in a Cal Fire-recommended Very High Fire Severity Zone.

An increased turning radius to accommodate a fire engine was also required of the developer of Via Moraga across from the Rheem Shopping Center, as the 18-unit complex features very narrow roadways.

"We try to be fair with the developers, but they are putting up a project in our district. They have to abide by our ordinances and our fire code," Leonard said.

Sometimes geography makes things difficult. Palos Colorados lies at the Moraga-Lafayette border, at one of the farthest points in the district from a fire station. The development will feature homes up to 5,000 square feet and lots of open space, which will require extensive vegetation management. "People want to enjoy the open space, but open space can burn,"

Leonard said.

Because the 71 homes in the proposed Indian Valley subdivision lie in a straight line along a ridge near the Valle Vista staging area, not only is egress unsafe but there is no space for engine turnaround and only a single emergency vehicle access point. "The driveways will be extremely steep, and the road to Canyon is winding, dangerous and not stable," Leonard said. That project remains far from completion.

In the case of the Camino Ricardo subdivision in Moraga, the district insisted that the homeowners' association agree to maintain the vegetation in the common areas, which include a pedestrian bridge to Commons Park, to adhere to the fire code.

Not every situation with a developer is a confrontation, Leonard said. "Most of them are pretty savvy," she said. "We keep each other on our toes." She specifically mentioned Brooks Street, one of the original Wilder developments, as very easy to work with.

But the bottom line for the district is safety, and is non-negotiable. "These developments will be here long after I'm gone," Leonard said. "I will not sign a final building permit until our work is done."

"We're not doing this on a whim."

MOFD, ConFire chiefs update new Lamorinda lawmakers on concerns

By Nick Marnell

The fire chiefs from the two local Lamorinda fire districts warned of their operational concerns and shared their goals with newly installed council members from each Lamorinda municipality at an orientation session held at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center.



From left, MOFD's Stephen Healy, and ConFire's Lewis Broschard and Jeff Carman.

Photo Nick Marnell

First and foremost, the chiefs emphasized that dropped boundaries exist between the two districts, meaning that regardless in what city an emergency occurs, the closest fire engine or ambulance will respond to the call, no matter what.

"That is not always the case," said Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Carman, who noted that at his prior fire agency in the city of Roseville, such a relationship did not exist.

Both districts have rebuilt fire stations in the works. "We're waiting on the weather," said Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Stephen Healy, who estimated the reopening of Fire Station 43 in north Orinda for sometime this fall.

ConFire is waiting on the city. The district submitted its application to rebuild western Lafayette Fire Station 16 in September, received a thumbs-up from the Planning Commission in December and awaits a decision from the Design Review Commission Feb. 27. "We have a ways to go," said Deputy Chief Lewis Broschard, who expects that the district will bid out the project by early summer.

But the biggest concern, shared by both fire agencies, is how to protect areas like Happy Valley

and north Orinda from a disastrous wildfire. "We hear it time and time again," Carman said. "It's like the Oakland hills, on the dry side of the mountain. It's a recipe for disaster."

Because the topography is challenging there, as are the roads, ConFire has teamed with the county Sheriff's Department to use its helicopter to help with fire suppression. "In those hills, if we're off by just a little bit in our response, it's not like we can go around to the next block. It would be maybe a five minute drive," Carman said.

Healy explained that heavy rains beget concerns about more foliage that can act as fuels, and he described grasses in north Orinda that grew up to 11 feet high last year. "That is what late spring rains can do," he said.

The chief also advised the council members that MOFD's Dennis Rein, the Lamorinda emergency preparedness coordinator, promotes joint interagency efforts with respect to disaster preparedness.

Council members Ivor Samson and Cameron Burks of Lafayette, Kymberleigh Korpus of Moraga and Darlene Gee of Orinda attended the Jan. 31 orientation session, organized and conducted by Lafayette City Manager Steve Falk.

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