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Sinkhole update: Orinda struggles to find best solution

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda is now considering a temporary bridge to fix the Miner Road sinkhole problem.

According to Public Works Director Larry Theis, the creek that was the subject of the culvert failure is on private property, and the city cannot perform repairs without an emergency right-of-entry from the property owners, Darryl and Jana Rains. Even if the city were to consider a legal process of condemnation and eminent domain, it would take up to a year. Therefore, the city is working with the property owners to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

The city first proposed an elliptical corrugated metal pipe, then a larger, rectangular concrete culvert, but the property owner has expressed, at public meetings, his belief that only a bridge will provide sufficient protection against flooding. He is now examining further hydraulic studies and other information provided by the city. Rains has obtained legal representation and an engineering firm to conduct a peer review of the city's supplemental hydraulic analysis. City staff is actively working with the property owner to resolve the concerns soon. Orinda Country Club has provided an emergency right of entry to the city.

The city council also heard complaints from residents of Miner Road and the surrounding area of a spike in crime in the affected region. Speaking at the public hearing on Feb. 21, Gary Curtis told of increased burglaries, including a home invasion where the residents' children were held at gunpoint. Those residents will not be returning to their home, he said. The reasons for the increased crime seems to be that the road is now dark and untraveled, and thus has become a target for criminals. Police Chief Mark Nagel, contacted after the meeting, said that he has asked officers to go through the detour routes at least once each 12-hour shift. Nagel expressed relief that the teenaged children involved in the home invasion incident were unharmed.

Theis provided a sinkhole status update to the city council at the meeting. He noted that Lauterwasser Creek is flowing freely through the road embankment since the partial removal of the existing stone headwalls. The concrete box plan would have qualified as "emergency opening" work, whereas a bridge may be considered "permanent restoration," which would entail lower levels of reimbursement and a longer timeframe for obtaining permits. If the city opts for either a concrete box or a temporary bridge, either may be considered a "betterment" for purposes of federal reimbursement, which means that the city will probably bear the cost of this element of the emergency repair work, and the cost of either the box or a bridge will be higher than that of the pipe. The time frame of the repair depends on resolution of the right-of-entry issue, the type of fix employed and, of course, the weather.

The city is also working on a number of fronts to ease the difficulties caused by the sinkhole, including efforts to keep the public more informed of the progress of the repair; working on permanent stripping of the detour routes at the significant cost of \$25,000 to \$50,000, which may not be reimbursable; and assisting affected homeowners with their insurance claim forms.

Theis also said EBMUD confirmed it has made a temporary connection from another zone to maintain service for the Los Altos reservoir at the end of Los Altos Dr. in Orinda. The damaged waterline is being maintained with low pressure to prevent contamination of the system. Orinda has received verbal agreement from the California Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration that the overall project can proceed under an emergency opening process, which allows the city to bypass some of the regular environmental and design review requirements. The city has obtained the necessary emergency permit from the Army Corps of Engineers to install a new culvert and restore the roadway for traffic.

A community meeting is scheduled to take place at the Sleepy Hollow Elementary School at 6 p.m. on March 14. Theis, Nagel and Interim City Manager Steve Salomon will provide updates on the progress on the project and provide information on additional safety measures that will be put into place due to the detours.

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