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Nightmare on Orchard Road

By Sora O'Doherty



A snarl of traffic clogs Orchard Road Aug. 4 in Orinda. Photo Sora O'Doherty

The EBMUD work involves replacement of 2,000 feet of water pipeline on Moraga Way. The existing cast iron water main has had a recorded total of 17 main breaks with seven major breaks occurring in the past five years, according to EBMUD Community Affairs Representative Kathryn Horn who attended the meeting. These breaks have put nearly 70 customers out of water each time, created major traffic impacts and resulted in the discharge of chlorinated water into nearby creeks. The pipes are being replaced with new, eight-inch steel pipe, which will provide reliable water supply to nearby residents for decades.

Originally, it was planned to have two lanes of traffic on Moraga Way but based on the placement of the utilities, it was necessary to go to one lane being flagged in either direction. That resulted in massive 45-minute delays for commuters. The City of Orinda directed EBMUD to detour traffic onto Orchard Road.

Lynn Ballou, who lives on Orchard Road, estimates that hundreds of additional cars are traveling on her road each hour during the 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. detour period, and worries that this is putting an additional strain on this road that was not designed for such heavy traffic.

There are 37 homes on the stretch and 150 residents, according to Gloria So. The traffic, the residents say, is causing actual damage to their properties and potential danger to themselves and their children, not to mention making it practically impossible to back out of their driveways during rush hour. Susan Cole fears that utilities under the street will be damaged, and, more importantly, that the city is putting the lives of residents at risk. EBMUD estimates the repair work will take 10 weeks to complete. Residents are particularly concerned because this traffic chaos is occurring even before the start of school traffic in late August. They want the detour to Orchard Rd stopped, longer working hours by EBMUD to hasten the end of the project, and better communication from EBMUD to affected residents.

Horn said that since the detour began, many residents have expressed their concerns. To address traffic and safety issues EBMUD has added additional signage, including 15 mph signs, asked Orinda Police Department for additional patrols, added three temporary speed bumps to the half mile stretch of road, and restricted right turns onto Orchard Road. EBMUD said that they have been detouring truck traffic off of Orchard Road and down Moraga Way, but residents report that some trucks were still using Orchard Road.

In her later update, Horn said that EBMUD would immediately have a street sweeper clean dust and debris on Orchard Road, weekly, for the duration of the project. She added that they would work with their flaggers to make sure they are doing their absolute best to ensure that trucks are not entering Orchard Road, with the necessary exceptions of delivery, garbage and other utility trucks with business on Orchard. In addition to appearing at the next city council meeting, EBMUD also promised weekly updates to the council and residents.

The traffic near Moraga Way is also being compounded by work being done by Moraga to repair the sinkhole on Rheem Boulevard. Horn noted that the Town of Moraga has proposed their own detours, including the use of residential roads, but that they have not found one that would reroute traffic efficiently enough.

Director of Public Works Larry Theis said that the residents had very reasonable concerns, but that if the project were stopped, it might be a year before EBMUD could return to it, and that in the long term there would be bad effects.

Council Member Inga Miller, after asking if residents could call a flagger to assist them in exiting their

driveways, was told that they could. Mayor Eve Phillips asked if the residents wanted the work to continue on weekends and Vice Mayor Amy Worth wondered how many days could be saved by weekend work.

Council Member Darlene Gee said she had so many questions that she requested that the matter be agendized, and the rest of the council agreed.

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