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Defensible Space and Evacuation - Lamorinda Residents Urged to Plan Against Wildfire

By *Sophie Braccini*

At the April 27 Lamorinda Wildfire Forum, held in the Orinda Library Auditorium and moderated by KSFO's Barbara Simpson, our state, county and local fire agencies delivered the same message: Protect your home by creating a defensible space around it and evacuate early if needed.

Assistant State Fire Marshal Tonya Hoover, Contra Costa County Fire Protection District (CCCFPD) Fire Marshall Richard Carpenter, California State Department of Fire and Forestry Protection (Cal Fire) Battalion Chief Rob Van Wormer and Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Fire Marshal Mike Mentink shared with Lamorinda residents their experience with fire in wildland - urban interface areas. Their mission was clear; give residents a sufficient dose of reality so they set into place measures to protect their lives, their homes and their neighborhoods.

"Can we have a fire like we had in 1991 (the Oakland Hills fire)?" asked Van Wormer, yes, we can, and when a fire like that gets going there is no stopping it until the weather changes." Van Wormer stated that the objective of his department was to contain 95% of the fires within an area of ten acres or less and that Cal Fire had met that mark consistently for the past 10 years. He explained that in case of emergency, 40 fire engines would reach our area within two or three hours and hundreds in 24 hours. But he reminded the audience that in 1991, more than 790 properties were lost during the first hour of the fire alone, and that the flames ultimately killed 25 people and injured 150 others. "Am I starting to scare you?" he questioned, "That might be a good thing, a very good thing."

Carpenter took the stage next to explain what preventive measures residents can take to protect themselves and their properties. "You need to make sure that our trucks can have access your homes," he said, "we need vertical clearance, we need large driveways, and acceptable road conditions." Having 100 feet of defensible space "is not moon-scaping," said Carpenter, "you need to space out, control and clean up the vegetation, and remove all dead material, from pine needles on roofs to dead branches in juniper bushes." He warned, "I will never put the life of one of my men at risk to defend a piece of property. It is the responsibility of the homeowners to make sure that fire fighters can have safe access to their homes at all times."

The next big topic was evacuation. "If more than 200 people lost their lives in the bushfires in southeastern Australia last February, it's because people didn't evacuate early enough," said Mentink. "Now on Red Flag days, Australian families leave their homes and go to the beach," added Mentink.

Red Flag days are acute fire hazard days that are signaled at fire stations by

the flying of a red flag or by signage warning of 'extreme fire danger.'

"In case of a fire it is important to stay tuned to local news such as the local radio, and be ready to evacuate," added Carpenter, "have a plan, know what you will take, know where to meet, and don't forget water for your pets."

The Wildfire Forum was a cooperative effort of the Lamorinda Community Response Team, Lafayette Emergency Preparedness Commission, Orinda Public Safety Advisory Commission and the Canyon Fire Council.

"The biggest benefit of the meeting was a strong 'we care' message both from the public and from the agencies," observed organizer Jonathan Goodwin of Canyon Fire. "Usually not a lot of people show up at these meeting, unless they are held immediately after a big fire," he added, noting that 110 people attended the Forum.

In preparation for the event, Goodwin had collected questions from the public and most of them revolved around the question, "What can we do in our neighborhood?"

"The Forum was a 'stage 1' action," stated Goodwin, and organizing neighborhoods will be 'stage 3.'" Goodwin would like to see a 'stage 2,' more specific informational meetings addressing such issues as fire behavior and evacuation planning. "In the (post-forum) evaluation forms that were returned, people asked for nuts and bolts information," he said, that's what these meetings will do."

Goodwin says organizers hope to offer more informational programs during this coming fire season.

Want to know more?

The Lamorinda Wildfire Forum can be viewed on Comcast Channel 26 at the following times:

- Friday May 15 @ 7:30pm
- Sunday May 17 @ 10am and 7pm
- Thursday May 21 @ 7pm

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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