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Avoiding the Potential Pitfalls (and Potholes) from Road Construction

By Victor Ryerson

Moraga Way is nice and smooth thanks to its recent repaving a few years ago, and the bikeway on both sides is finally free of cracks and treacherous potholes. But with PG&E cutting into the new pavement about every 100 yards or so to replace copper laterals, seams can appear, water can intrude, and the whole process of degradation can start all over again. So what does Orinda do to ensure that Measure X won't have to be placed on the ballot in a few years to start the repair cycle all over again?

For one thing, any such work requires the utility to obtain an encroachment permit from the city, and that requires the replacement paving material to be the same as what is removed, and the striping to be restored. The city monitors these actions in case it becomes necessary to enforce the permit requirements.

The city also tries its best to provide drivers a period of peace and quiet. "Utilities are put on notice about contemplated (Orinda) roadwork," explains Senior City Engineer Larry Theis. Following the work, the city imposes a two-year moratorium prohibiting utilities from tearing into a newly paved street, hopefully discouraging the deterioration of the paving from unplanned utility work. "The moratorium does not preclude emergency repairs," however. The current PG&E work was planned, a necessary service improvement project that it had scheduled with the city well in advance.

What efforts are made to prevent deterioration once the pavement cutting must be done? One technique is T-cutting the trench, which means that an additional amount of the paving is removed parallel to the edges of the trench or hole. After the hole is filled, the extra paving on the sides reduces the likelihood of water intrusion into the trench, and prevents the newly paved work from sagging and becoming a new bump or pothole, hopefully.

As for the inconvenience caused by the exasperating flagging and detours while the work is underway, the best explanation was provided years ago by Consolidated Edison, unapologetically emblazoned on its construction barriers on New York City's busy streets: "Dig we must."

Reach the reporter at: victor@lamorindaweekly.com

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