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Published December 30th, 2015

Clearance a Necessity on Lamorinda Roads

By Nick Marnell



Photo courtesy Moraga-Orinda Fire District

Kathy Leonard returned from a field trip at the site of the Valley Fire and she was jolted by how similar that area is to Orinda, with its private roads, narrow thoroughfares and heavy tree vegetation. "Then, you add a sustained drought, with a lot of those trees near the end of their life cycle, and we could have a serious public safety problem," said the fire marshal of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

Though unmaintained private roads in Orinda rank atop Leonard's public safety concerns, areas in Bollinger Canyon and Canyon pose similar perils. Nor does Lafayette get off the hook, with its share of troublesome private roads. "For example, the Hunsacker Canyon area," said Contra Costa County Fire Protection District captain George Laing. Leonard's goal is to improve public safety through education, to help the fire engines get to an incident quicker. "It's a challenge for the fire

district. It's a challenge for the city of Orinda. It's a challenge for the homeowner," she said.

While public roads are maintained by the Lamorinda municipalities, private roads are maintained by the property owners, who must clear away unruly vegetation. "We need a vertical clearance of 15 feet, and if possible, 3 feet from the sides of each roadway," said Leonard. She noted that the vegetation canopy over the roadway caused problems for evacuation at the Valley Fire. Plus the fact that the fire burned utility poles, leaving no cell coverage, no Internet access, and people couldn't receive the message to evacuate. Potential for such a disaster exists in the private enclaves of Lamorinda.

The unkempt vegetation also can damage the district apparatus. "But it's not about our equipment," said Leonard. "The engines will get there, regardless of the challenge, even if it means damaging the equipment. It's the delay in response."

Fire inspectors Kristian Balfour and Trent Willis drove a Ford F-250 along a narrow Orinda private road, and pointed out a recent accident scene. An overhanging branch from a large tree impeded an MOFD engine, and as the engine tried to avoid trash cans on the side of the road, it wrecked into the tree.

"It's not about us trying to be difficult," said Willis, as he crept through North Road in Orinda, another spot the utility vehicle - let alone a fire engine - had trouble navigating. He repeated Leonard's words nearly verbatim, pounding home a consistent message. "The firefighters will risk injury, they'll rip the lights off the engine to get through, they'll do whatever they have to do to get there," he said. "It's all about the delay."

City manager Janet Keeter confirmed that Orinda has no jurisdiction over maintenance of private roads. Leonard said she hopes the maintenance efforts will be governed by common sense.

"We'd like to see this work completed by the beginning of the fire season, by early next spring," said Leonard. "In the winter, you don't have to worry about sparks causing fires, or worry about the

low humidity. Now is the time to do it."

She fears that not doing it could bring dire consequences.

"The Valley Fire burned at six miles an hour. A lot of people can't run that fast," said Leonard. "If we don't act, we'll be in the same situation."

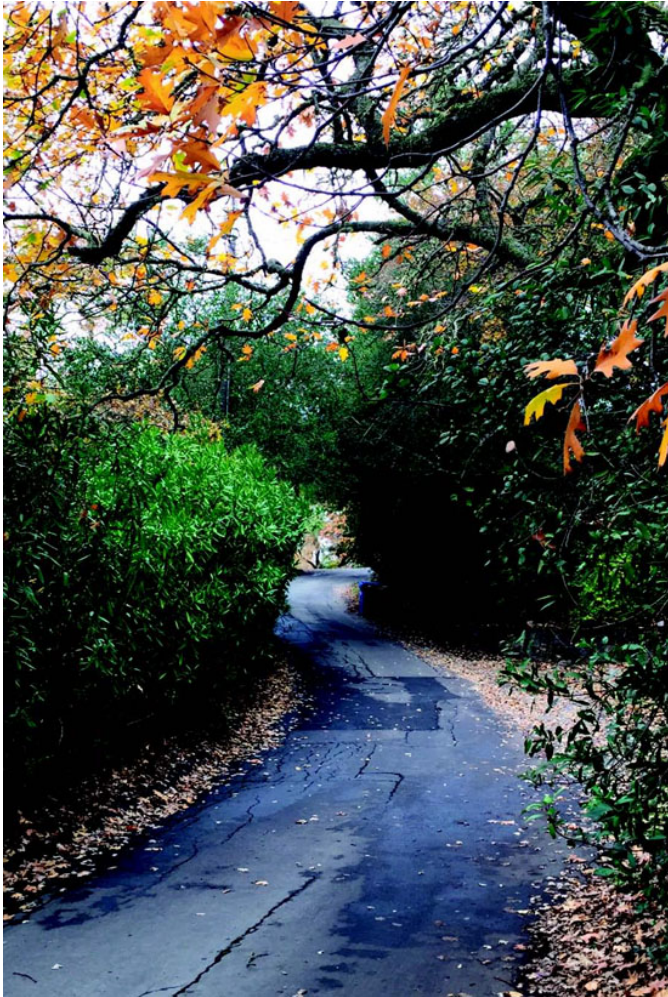


Photo courtesy Moraga-Orinda Fire District

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