



Published June 14, 2017

Canyon challenges Moraga's handling of bridge crisis

By *Sophie Braccini*

The Canyon School District declared a state of emergency over the closure of the bridge connecting the small enclave to the town of Moraga that occurred in mid-April.

According to the school board, the situation endangers the 70 students that attend the school since Moraga-Orinda Fire District emergency services cannot reach the community anymore. This declaration included a challenge to what Moraga has been doing to reopen the road.

The Moraga Town Council will discuss all possible options to reopen the road at its June 14 meeting.

For Moraga Public Works Director Edric Kwan, the Canyon School District's claim that Moraga is stalling comes from its misunderstanding of the complexity of the bridge situation and how the appropriate emergency funding works.

Jim Smith, president of the Canyon School District, explains that if an incident occurred in Canyon, rescue services would have to come from Oakland. The Canyon school board believes that the response time would be unacceptable, bordering on 30 minutes. Pressed by what they feel is an emergency, the school board members decided to take things in their own hands.

According to Smith, the only entity that should have been able to declare if a bridge is safe or not is the California Department of Transportation, not the consultants hired by Moraga. The Canyon resident explains that this is the only agency that has the expertise to assess a bridge's usability. Smith confirmed that the town of Moraga reached out to CalTrans when EBMUD contractors signaled that a landslide was threatening the bridge, but that the agency does not intervene in an emergency, unless it gets direction to do so from state or district emergency services. The board is even questioning whether or not the bridge should stay closed.

Moraga was fast to answer to Canyon's declaration of emergency, even using the Nixle emergency channel to broadcast its response. Priebe characterized Canyon's allegations that the bridge had not been properly assessed as "gross misrepresentation of the facts." He explained that the town decided to close the bridge following expert advice that indicated that the structure was unsafe for public use. The manager added that the town declared its local emergency pursuant to the correct government code, referencing the California Emergency Services Act.

The Canyon School Board's president said that if the bridge is not safe, a Pioneer Bridge should be installed. The Canyon school board asked for an estimate of a 150-foot, two lane steel bridge and received a quote for \$250,000. Smith adds that if the hill is unstable, then the town should already have started to build a retaining wall.

At previous Moraga town council meetings the town engineer and public work director made a detailed description of the work that needed to be done before a temporary bridge be set in place. The hill that failed continues to move and a complete understanding of the depth and span of the instabilities needs to be completed before remediation takes place, otherwise whatever is built now to contain the hill might fail again. Only then will remediation have a chance to last, and a temporary solution can be put in place.

At the beginning of June the town was notified that the Federal Emergency Management Agency denied the Town's Public Assistance request because the Emergency Relief program administered by the Federal Highway Administration is the lead federal agency for bridges and roadways emergency projects. The Town will focus on working with FHWA for ER program grant funding.

At the June 14 council meeting, which starts at 7 p.m., Kwan will present six alternatives and the council will decide on a course of action. The solutions range from doing nothing to constructing a permanent new bridge. Several alternatives of temporary bridges will be proposed. The meeting is opened to the public at 335 Rheem Blvd. and can also be seen online at <https://livestream.com/moraga>.

Sinkhole bid to be awarded

The town received four bids to repair the sinkhole at Rheem Boulevard and Center Street, ranging between \$1.3 and \$2 million. At this week's city council meeting, the contract should be awarded to the lowest bidder, McGuire and Hester, if the council finds them responsive and responsible. If the council follows staff recommendation work should start in July for 77 consecutive workdays. The Rheem Boulevard and Center Street intersection will be completely closed off to motorists during construction.

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