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Lafayette intent on improving neighborhood wildfire mitigation

By Nick Marnell

For a city that a fire chief once said kept him up at night because of the potential for a massive wildfire, Lafayette lags far behind the two other Lamorinda municipalities in the number of neighborhood groups that are mitigating the risks of such a calamity.

But thanks to efforts of local public officials, the gap between the municipalities is likely to shrink.

The Firewise USA program, a joint offering of three national organizations and sponsored by the National Fire Protection Association, encourages homeowners to take individual responsibility for preparing their homes from the risk of wildfire. According to program materials, Firewise provides resources to help homeowners learn how to adapt to living with wildfire and encourages neighbors to work together to take action now to prevent losses.

The voluntary program has been around since 2002, has nearly 1,500 active member communities and boasts a participation retention rate of 80% over the past decade. The latest NFPA figures show Orinda with 17 Firewise groups and Moraga with three, with a handful of applications pending..

Lafayette has no Firewise communities, which Mayor Susan Candell vowed to change. "Getting Firewise communities established in Lafayette is my top priority for public safety," she said.

The mayor concedes that it will require local community leaders to step up, as they have done in Moraga and Orinda. Candell said she has been approached by members of the Orinda Firewise groups "who volunteered to help us set up a Firewise community."

But the chair of the Lafayette Emergency Preparedness Commission says it's been all talk and no action in the city.

"The residents aren't educated on Firewise," Duncan Seibert said. "People have talked about it, but there have been no resources allocated to pushing it."

Seibert placed much of the blame for inaction on the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, whose former fire chief Jeff Carman said that Lafayette was the area of the district that concerned him more than any other for the potential of a devastating wildfire.

"We have interest from maybe a half dozen neighborhoods," Seibert said. "But we don't have the information we need to start the Firewise process. We need a commitment from the fire district."

Fire Marshal Chris Bachman apologized to the commission for the delay and said that ConFire hired a new fire inspector, Taylor King, who has been assigned to coordinate the district Firewise program.

Typically, a neighborhood of at least eight properties that desires Firewise designation will contact its fire agency, which sends a representative to a community meeting to help do a written wildfire risk assessment of the properties. The representative looks for ways the property owners are hardening - and plan to harden - their properties in order to prevent the structures from burning down.

The assessment takes about an hour and a half. The fire agency helps the neighborhood group write up the document, which includes a three-year wildfire mitigation action plan, and the assessment is included with the community application to the NFPA. Once the application is approved, the community is awarded its Firewise designation. The community must reapply each year to retain its status and needs to update its wildfire mitigation action plan every three years.

"The national Firewise USA recognition program is an important tool for our residents in wildfire prone areas to work together to reduce wildfire risks in their neighborhoods," Fire Chief Lewis Broschard said. "We are committed to helping our communities attain and maintain voluntary Firewise certification."

The ConFire program officially kicked off Feb. 10 with a meeting between King and representatives from the Lafayette Glen Road neighborhood, a potential Firewise community.

Dennis Rein, Lamorinda Emergency Preparedness Coordinator, helped set up Orinda and Moraga Firewise communities. "I think (ConFire officials) will be pleasantly surprised with the community participation in this," Rein said.

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[back](#)

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