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El Toyonal red-flag day parking restrictions made permanent; warnings eliminated

By Sora O'Doherty

The on-street parking ban on El Toyonal on red-flag days with high fire danger will become permanent in accordance with the wishes expressed by the Orinda City Council on Oct. 19. Further, the council agreed with staff that the warnings given on the first three red-flag days of the fire season during the pilot program should be eliminated. The council considered the staff report presented by Senior Engineer Jason Chen, acting director of public works.

Since the pilot program was adopted in August of 2020, it has been in place through two fire seasons. The purpose of the program is to allow for any necessary evacuation on the notoriously narrow, winding, hilly street that ascends from Camino Pablo to Wildcat Canyon Road. The program restricts stopping or parking on red flag days to keep the roadway clear for evacuation.

A number of flip signs have been installed along the route and can be opened by public works to display red flag warning signs that notify residents when parking restrictions are in effect. There are five signs along the route, including one at the top and one at the bottom of the El Toyonal hill.

During the pilot period, Chen reported, there have been some complaints that residents don't know when the restrictions go into force or when the restrictions end. In addition, some residents have complained of difficulty in finding alternative parking.

The council also discussed the existing exemptions, which provide for active loading or unloading of vehicles and active construction where there can be encroachment permits. The parking restriction extends to five feet from the edge of the existing pavement.

During the pilot period, there has been one part-time enforcement officer. Over the course of 14 red flag events, there were 37 written warnings with additional verbal warnings, and 10 actual citations were issued. Chen reported that performance has improved, with fewer violations being observed. Chen also noted that weather changes quickly, making the ban challenging to implement, and encouraged residents to check more often with the National Weather Service and the MOFD; out of 14 events, only eight were enforced. PG&E will be helping out with enforcement going forward and Orinda Police Chief Ryan Sullivan is willing to embrace enforcement, according to Chen.

Chen said that in the two fire seasons that the restrictions have been in place, fire awareness has been ever increasing. Staff said that the program does seem to be working and recommended that all warnings be eliminated and that enforcement begin immediately upon the next red-flag day.

In public comments, an El Toyonal resident said that he thinks the program is very good, but suggested the need for cameras to be more instantaneous. There are a lot of alerts, he said, and they are done very well, but any improvement is worthwhile. He suggested that the city should have a way to tow people on a red flag day.

Chen responded that towing has not been researched, but that parking enforcement is not allowed to tow.

The exemption for construction workers is based on the idea that they are on site, close to the vehicles and can move them quickly in the event of an emergency.

Vice Mayor Dennis Fay suggested that more thought is needed on the compliance side. He pointed out that ticketing a vehicle while the owner is inside their home doesn't result in the vehicle being quickly moved.

Council Member Inga Miller concurred.

Mayor Amy Worth warned that doing a red flag road clearance is a very time-consuming process. "There is a growing problem with house construction on some of our very narrow roads," she said, "but that is an issue for another day." The mayor agreed with the elimination of warnings, but suggested that residents receive a post card at the start of fire season warning residents that citations will be issued immediately for violations. She also suggested that there be some alternatives for parking on red flag days, such as a lower parking lot, or suspending enforcement of parking time limits in some areas in downtown.

City Manager David Biggs said that he likes the idea of the postcard warning, and suggested an email blast too. He added that he is working on developing a more robust communication system and has hired a firm. As to how red-flag days are established in the first place, according to MOFD's Dennis Rein, forecasts come out of the National Weather Service in Monterey.

Warren Blier, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service explained that "it's basically a mixture of different criteria that taken together suggest a risk of rapid wildfire spread is especially high." The type of weather patterns that can cause a watch or warning include low relative humidity, strong winds, dry fuels, the possibility of dry lightning strikes, or any combination of the above. Monterey uses sophisticated technology to constantly monitor all the factors that contribute to weather warnings.

Once Monterey issues a red-flag warning for the Lamorinda area, Rein has teams of volunteers who go out and adjust the fire danger level signs, raising the red flag on each. A second group of volunteers the Lamorinda incident notification group, then notifies city managers, Contra Costa County fire, school superintendents, and others who need to know. At that point, Orinda staff go out and flip open the red-flag day parking prohibition signs on El Toyonal.

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