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Recent tree mitigation work being done by Caltrans on Highway 24 near St. Stephens Drive, on El Miso Ranch Road.

Photo courtesy MOFD

## Dead trees along Highway 24 removed to promote safety

By Sora O'Doherty

Beginning in late December, Caltrans maintenance personnel have been removing potentially hazardous trees beside state route 24 between First Street in Lafayette and the Orinda exit. The trees were primarily dead and dying Monterey pines.

"The project is much more complex than simply falling trees in a forest. Crews must use a large crane to remove the trees one piece at a time to keep roads open and the public and employees safe," said Caltrans Bay Area's Deputy of Maintenance Parviz Lashai. The project goal is to remove more than 100 dead trees along the highway at a

cost of just over \$150,000.

According to Marcus Wagner, Caltrans public information officer, the increase in tree mortality is most likely due to stress brought about by several years of severe drought and invasive pests such as bark beetles. Dead or dying "red-needle" trees are of concern as the needles can become flying embers and help create the conditions for rapid wildfire spread. In their weakened condition, these trees could also possibly fall and obstruct portions of the roadway.

Wagner told Lamorinda Weekly that approximately 40 dead trees were targeted for removal with 20 trees removed so far. Caltrans' contractor estimates another 10 days of work. To prevent prob-

lems with erosion, crews are removing the trees, but leaving the roots in place. The work covers about a two-mile stretch of Highway 24, from mile marker 3.00 to 5, in and around the cities of Orinda and Lafayette.

Both the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District applauded the work being completed prior to the summer fire season. MOFD Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs said, "Wildfire prevention needs to be a year-round project to keep our communities safe." Residents are encouraged to check their property for dead or dying trees and take advantage of the winter and spring months to remove them well before wildfire prevention inspections begin on June 1.

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## Back to school in the time of Omicron



Photo Sora O'Doherty

Miramonte High School students head to cars and homes after regular school dismissal on the afternoon of Jan. 13.

By Sora O'Doherty

Everybody is working hard to keep Lamorinda students in school, even as the Omicron variant of the coronavirus sends positive tests in the schools up sharply. For administrators and parents, and maybe for students, the things on their minds are primarily how to access testing and keeping track of those rising numbers of cases, hoping to see an equally sharp downturn soon.

Although illness and hospitalizations from the variant have also jumped up at both the state and county levels, Lamorinda schools, as well as Las Lomas in Walnut Creek at the high school level, are not seeing any hospitalizations to date among either students or staff, according to Acalanes Union High School District Superintendent John Nickerson. Nickerson reported that absences are currently running at 10 to 14% (higher than the normal 4%) but that campuses feel relatively normal and classes don't feel empty. Nevertheless, he said, anxiety and concern is increased in both staff and students, as they try to negotiate the highly contagious Omicron variant COVID-19 surge.

"We believe students are home with COVID-19 symptoms (where in past years they might have come to school) and probably some parents who are holding students home as a precaution," Nickerson explained, adding that the absence rate dropped each day since peaking at all schools a week ago Thursday/Friday.

Safety protocols are in force at all local schools. ... continued on Page A7

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