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Fire Abatement begins on 21 town-owned parcels

By Vera Kochan



Hand crews conduct fire abatement work on Mulholland Ridge Photo provided

Town Hall (one parcel), while mostly a structure and parking lot, is subject to defensible space standards that routine landscaping will accomplish.

The Council Chambers/Corporation Yard (one parcel) is also mostly structure that requires minimal work.

Even though the Moraga Library (one parcel) is mostly a building and parking lot, the property does contain a hillside that is subject to defensible space standards and weed abatement. The Hacienda de las Flores has four structures (three parcels): Hacienda Building, La Sala Building, Casita Building and the Pavilion Building which are all subject to defensible space standards. A major drawback on the property is the hillside-covered Eucalyptus grove. In 2020, six trees were removed with the closest proximity to private structures in order to widen the fuel break.

Moraga Commons Park (two parcels) has a lawn that is regularly mowed, but the right-of-way land that runs from Moraga Road along St. Mary's Road toward Carter Drive is considered an evacuation route that must be kept clear.

Rancho Laguna Park (one parcel) has a combination of maintained lawn and natural areas that need fire abatement.

Of the eight town-owned undeveloped parcels, the largest is Mulholland Open Space Preserve (three parcels). With 250 acres it is the town's biggest fire abatement challenge in that a large portion of the area maintains its natural state

The Moraga Road Right-of-Way (one parcel) is located across from the Moraga Commons Park and is adjacent to West Commons Park. This area requires annual discing work.

West Commons Park (one parcel) is a new parcel to the town and will need to be monitored to decide what type of future abatement will be necessary.

Vacant Lots (three parcels) located at the intersection of Rheem Boulevard and St. Mary's Road fall under the full abatement category.

The town does perform in-house fire abatement work of weeds through flail mowing, trimming/edging, and medians (treatment after weed removal). Fuel reduction abatement involves limbing-up trees, shrub and brush removal, and chipper use. Outside contractors are hired to weed abate large areas and perform fuel reduction through tree removal, complex and specialized fuel reduction, limbing-up trees, and hand crews to work steep hillsides.

Based on the results of staff's fire abatement study and recommendations, the council, minus Member Sona Makker who was absent that evening, agreed that the town continues to collaborate with MOFD regarding prescribed burns, expanded use of burn piles and expanded use of their Chipper Program.

Council also agreed to the continued use of cattle grazing on Mulholland, with the possibility of expanding the practice to other town parcels; continue to leverage available grant funding for fire abatement work; increase the FY 2022-23 budget for fire abatement to \$109,000 and plan for additional annual expenses of \$94,000 with regards to Mulholland; and use a hand crew to establish and maintain Mulholland's perimeter

Just like every property owner in Moraga, the town is required to follow fire abatement procedures on its 21 parcels that comprise 382 acres of both developed and undeveloped land. Projected fire prevention costs are expected to increase from \$93,000 in Fiscal Year 2021-22 to \$109,000 in FY 2022-23 thanks to new requirements.

As noted in Parks and Recreation Director Breyana Brandt's May 11 staff report, the town council approved \$20,000 in the FY 2020-21 budget to complete a fire abatement study through a consultant. Unable to find a consultant, town staff completed the analysis with the help of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, thereby reallocating the money toward funding fire abatement work.

There are nine developed parcels that the town is responsible for abatement during each fire season. The

fuel breaks over a three-year period from 2021-22 to 2024-25 with fuel modification through MOFD.

The town council was asked to "consider purchasing a Kubota skid-steer loader with a forestry package and the following attachments: battle axe mulcher attachment and a 30 series root grapple, or comparable. The \$119,547 cost of purchasing the skid-steer loader could be funded with Fund 100 - Palos Colorados." There was discussion as to whether Moraga, Orinda and MOFD could share the purchase cost; or if Moraga made the purchase the other two could rent the equipment. However, given the short window of time involved for fire abatement and the amount of terrain involved among the three parties, someone might get the short end of the usage stick when all is said and done. The topic will most likely come up for discussion at a future date.

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

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