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Spending Measure R money on wildfire preparedness not that easy

By Sora O'Doherty

The city of Orinda may be turning its thoughts to adding incentives for residents to bring their properties into compliance with fire codes to reduce the risk of wildfire damage in the city. At the City Council meeting on July 19, the council again looked at possible ways to put funds raised by the Supplemental Sales Tax to the best use to increase fire safety, in addition to allocating a portion of Measure R funds for road repairs (see story, Page A6).

City Manager David Biggs told the council that the Moraga-Orinda Fire District has a volunteer-driven Ambassador program. MOFD Ambassadors, at the request of property owners, examine the property and advise the owner what needs to be done to meet the fire code, and what can be done to improve fire safety of the property in general. Biggs suggested that the city fund an additional inspector focused on Orinda, in addition to the new inspector being hired by MOFD. He asked the council if they would like the city to take a greater role, particularly in regards to evacuation routes. He pointed out that only MOFD has the legal authority to address compliance with the fire code, which led him to the idea of the city offering incentives, perhaps for the removal of juniper bushes, required to be removed by the end of next year.

City Attorney Osa Wolff said that city action as owners and operators of the public right of way would not displace or substitute for MOFD, which has very clear and powerful tools under the fire code. Biggs added that if the city were to take the lead on evacuation routes, it would require additional staff.

In regard to that discussion, Vice Mayor Inga Miller asked Wolff if there were any estimates of the costs to update the city code to allow city inspections to increase their "line of sight" ability. Wolff replied that while updating the code would have modest costs, enforcement would be expensive and cantankerous with heavy burdens on city staff and potentially the city attorney as well.

The fire district does have a focus on the evacuation routes. MOFD does not want to accept money from the city for an additional inspector.

In public comments, Jud Hammon, chairman of the Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission, told the council, "I want to talk about something not exactly but tightly tied to" the discussion. "I haven't heard anything about tying enforcement to incentives. I think it has the potential of being a very important tool."

As part of the effort of the city to increase safety, a 2x2 committee of two members of the city council - Mayor Dennis Fay and Council Member Darlene Gee - and two members of MOFD board - President Michael Donner and Board Member Craig Jorgens - have been meeting regularly. Fay and Gee said they will bring the idea of incentives to the Aug. 15 committee meeting.

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