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Orinda takes an early lead on evacuation planning under new law

By Sora O'Doherty

Although not required by law to address the issue of evacuation planning until the update of the local hazard mitigation plan in a few years, Orinda decided to get an early start on the issue which has been mandated by Assembly Bill 747. The matter was brought to the City Council on Nov. 15, and the council received a presentation by city consultants, PlaceWorks.

When it comes to evacuation, Orinda is affected by evacuations of other local jurisdictions. City Manager David Biggs responded to a question about this, saying that like Orinda, Lafayette has also decided to get started on its AB 747 evacuation planning but Moraga has not yet moved in that direction. The evacuation plan will be an appendix to the Orinda Safety Element, which will come back to the city council in January. PlaceWorks Assistant Project Manager Jacqueline Protsman and Evacuation Study Lead Allison Giffin gave the presentation and answered questions during the ensuing discussion. A considerable portion of the presentation focused on the methodology used to identify different scenarios that might require evacuation of residents in various areas of Orinda. The methodology involved is not prescribed and is still somewhat new, according to PlaceWorks.

The council discussed the three scenarios in the presentation, wondering why there was not a scenario that would resemble the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire, which moved from the west toward the east. PlaceWorks suggested that the scenario that focuses on Briones Regional Park could be broadened to include a fire threat from a more westerly direction, but the council did not wish to take the focus off the substantial threat from Briones. Both Council Member Nick Kosla and Vice Mayor Inga Miller talked of their memories of the devastating 1991 fire, and expressed concerns that Orinda residents have appropriate evacuation routes in the event that another such fire should ever occur.

Another topic that came up for much discussion, including public comments from Gene Gottfried and Lynne Trowbridge, was the issue of locked gates on Emergency Vehicular Access roads throughout the city. Trowbridge stated that she almost lost a loved one during the Tubbs Fire when such a gate was not opened by the fire department, even though the fire truck was within sight of the gate, but was instructed to go somewhere else. Council Member Amy Worth asked if a car could drive through such a gate, even when locked, and City Manager David Biggs suggested that it would be a good area to study in the future. The evacuation plan is limited to wildfire events and landslides, as earthquakes and floods do not usually result in widespread evacuation. The presentation contained recommendations for both wildfires and landslides.

The recommendations arising from the wildfire analysis included employing red flag day parking restrictions and/or contra-flow land policies for certain roadway segments; having active preferred signal timing for signalized intersections along evacuation routes in direction of evacuation travel; facilitating the evacuation of vulnerable populations and residential facilities and reducing vehicle counts during an evacuation. Worth noted that staff has been working on a grant application to allow the upgrading of traffic signals to have more flexibility, especially in the event of an emergency. Mayor Dennis Fay also raised the issue of the crucial nature of the Camino Pablo interchange with the freeway and potential capital improvements to enable faster access to Highway 24.

In regard to landslides, it was recommended that Orinda staff maintain a database of evacuation route segments that are susceptible to landslide and use the database to track geotechnical studies and possible associated capital improvements. It was also recommended that the city implement proposed General Plan Safety Element Policies S-19, S-20, S-21 and S-23 related to requirements for geotechnical studies and resulting capital improvements, like grading and retaining walls, to fortify these particularly vulnerable and critical segments against landslide risk.

No action was required, as the evacuation plan will be incorporated with the Safety Element and will return to the council for further action early next year, after review by the Planning Commission. Biggs and Planning Director Drummond Buckley and Associate Planner Winnie Mui who attended the meeting and will follow up on the matters discussed. Biggs reiterated that Orinda's general advice regarding evacuation is: go soon, get to Highway 24 via your usual route if possible, and then go east or west as directed.

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