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MOFD suspends community chipping program

By Nick Marnell



MOFD wood chipper on the job Photo courtesy MOFD

MOFD would respond to a chipping request which had been neither submitted nor scheduled. One resident left piles of firewood to be chipped. Several neighborhoods were scheduled for a single day of chipping, but that sometimes turned into 10 days as piles of new material were added to the roadside.

"There will be an insatiable demand by the public," Winnacker said. "It will exceed what the district is capable of providing."

Options were discussed, including expanding the program year round; a truncated, three-day-a-week program; shifting money from other operations; and a cost-sharing model between the district and residents. But the talks inevitably reverted to either the program cost or the inability of the fire district to support the program.

To continue the chipping program for the 10 weeks until Sept. 1, it would cost the district up to \$10,000 per week. But that may not meet the communitywide demand, the chief said, as it would include only one machine each day. At times, the district rented three chippers a day this year.

"We've got to cut back spending, and now we're going to throw \$100,000 at a wood chipping program?" Director Greg Baitx said. "(The residents) can do it themselves." The district projects a \$1.5 million operating loss in 2021.

A cost-sharing proposal of \$50 per household went nowhere, though the idea of cost sharing as a motivational tool or incentive had some appeal. But the discussion came back to the use of district personnel.

"We have to do our inspections to make sure our evacuation routes are clear," Director Michael Donner said. District evacuation routes are the top priority for compliance inspections this summer.

"If the idea is to make the community safer, I'm going to bet that for \$100,000, you're going to reduce a lot more fuel in two and a half months through the chipper program than you are through the inspection program," Director Craig Jorgens said.

As the 2021 fiscal year budget had been approved, the addition of the chipping program required the board to reconsider the budget agenda item. Only directors Jorgens and John Jex - who are up for re-election in November - voted in favor of reconsidering the budget item, and the motion was defeated 3 to 2.

President Stephen Danziger cast the tie-breaking vote. "I suggest that we bring this item back to the board at our next meeting," Danziger said. The meeting is scheduled for July 15.

In the face of a passionate outcry from district residents to continue the program, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board June 17 passed on an opportunity to extend the district's highly acclaimed community chipping program through the summer months, citing the program cost and the need for the fuels mitigation staff to pivot from vegetation management to inspections of parcels in violation of the fire code.

Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs told the board that from Jan. 1 through June 12 - the final day of the program - the district chipped 190 tons of material, serviced 385 homes and spent \$50,000 in the process. He noted that the program became so wildly successful among residents and neighborhoods that scheduling became a challenge.

So much so that the district had to put on the brakes.

"This program was budgeted at a much lower amount than the demand required," Fire Chief Dave Winnacker said. "We have limited staff available and we have an obligation to follow up on violations and complaints that we've received." This year, MOFD has received 60 complaints of fire code violations from residents.

The chief pointed out examples of residents piling material along the roadside with an expectation that

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