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## Orinda reviews first year's progress with new sales tax

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda is beginning to see the power of youth. Reviewing progress on wildfire preparedness over the past year, one idea that came to the fore was involving schools in getting the messages out about evacuation, vegetation clearance, and home hardening. These are some of the major goals of the Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission, which was put in place by the increased sales tax measure approved by Orinda voters in November 2020, and presented its first annual review to a joint meeting with the Orinda City Council on March 23.

Commission Chair Judd Hammon presented the report, which also covered some of the work of the former Citizen Infrastructure Oversight Commission, which the SSTOC replaced, because the SSTOC only had its first meeting in March of 2021. Hammon was the chair of the CIOC at the time and transitioned to the SSTOC. Among the accomplishments of the SSTOC, the report praises Orinda staff, residents and non-resident property owners for having made important progress in reducing wildfire risk in Orinda and preparing for emergencies in general.

The report included examples, including that quite a few Orinda property owners have significantly reduced hazardous fuels on their properties, many through help from the Orinda Firewise Council. The city itself procured a chipper and truck and started an Orinda Chipping Program; updated the pilot Red-Flag Day parking restriction program on El Toyonal; cleared city properties to meet new MOFD code requirements; supported two mock evacuation drills and posted multiple announcements through the Orinda Outlook, social media and local newspapers.

Nevertheless, significant concerns remain. According to the SSTOC, portions of critical evacuation routes are still lined with dangerous, fire-prone vegetation too close to the road and may have issues with cars parked along very narrow, winding roadways. Far too many properties do not provide adequate defensible space around structures and far too few homes meet even minimum fire-hardening recommendations. The SSTOC concluded that many residents are not well prepared for emergencies in general.

Although Measure R is intended to deal with both fire safety and the city's roads and drains, it has been the city's priority to use most of the Measure R taxes in the beginning to focus on the critical issue of wildfire and emergency preparedness. The city's roads are now considered to be in very good shape, with the roads that still need repair scheduled to be completed by the end of 2023 without the need for Measure R funds. The average condition of Orinda roads in 2006 was poor, but work conducted with funds from the previous sales tax has successfully raised them to an average of very good.

Chair Hammon, in response to questions from the council, noted that "since we had made such good progress on roads, and our drains are not in such bad shape, we could take our foot off the gas and focus on fire for some years. This is what we've been doing, and the city staff has stepped up in a fantastic fashion to deal with roads and drains."

Storm drains are a significant issue. The city is currently performing video inspections of storm drains. Large pipes are scheduled for replacement through the capital equipment project. The \$205,000 2020 storm drain improvement project included four large pipes, two on Miner Road, one on Camino Pablo, and one on Camino Sobrante. No measure R funds were required. Smaller pipes under Orinda roads are often replaced as part of the annual paving project. However, there are still many large storm drain pipes at risk of failure. It is estimated that Measure R funds will be required for storm drain work in fiscal year 2024-25.

Council Member Amy Worth noted that one of the challenges moving forward is having a housing element that enables us to have money for roads and drains. She added that the city does receive transportation funds from the county, and that Orinda is the only community that puts solid waste fees into roads. Council Member Nick Kosla agreed that drains are crucial to emergency preparedness. "Look at Miner Road," he suggested, imagining how a disastrous sinkhole like the one that occurred in the beginning of 2017 would have negatively impacted evacuation in the event of an emergency.

For fiscal year 2020-21, Measure R sales tax has produced revenues of \$785,786. Expenditures of \$198,438 were used for the new chipper service, and by public works and parks on work to reduce hazards and trim or remove vegetation, with \$32,370 spent of staff and consultant support, and \$1,341 on legal services. However, the statistics come from very early in the time frame of the program. The unexpended balance of \$587,348 will be partially carried over to fiscal year 2021-22 activities, including the purchase of a truck and chipper. The city's annual audit resulted in a clean opinion. The report also contains extensive information about funding for roads and drains, which benefit from a large number of different sources.

The full report is available at <https://cityoforinda.box.com/s/aqrelwbwv0wc37m5hkju2o8a0sta7bup>

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