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Orinda not ready to move forward with sirens

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda City Council members are very interested in following developments in siren systems designed to help protect residents from disasters, but are not yet ready to adopt such a system. After the devastation caused in Lahaina, Maui, by a wind-driven wildfire last year, questions arose about the use of sirens to warn residents. Lahaina has sirens to warn of tsunami danger, but they were not used during the fire because officials feared that residents would flee in the wrong direction. In earlier California wildfires, some residents had no warning before the fire was upon them.

Berkeley, a city that borders Orinda, also has sirens because it is located on the bay and could be subject to tsunamis. On Feb. 6, the Orinda City Council took a look at recent developments in the Berkeley siren system to see if they thought Orinda should adopt a similar system. Berkeley and Orinda are similar in size, although Berkeley has a population of over 100,000 while Orinda's population is around 20,000. Orinda is hillier than Berkeley, and more wooded.

The new sirens in Berkeley have speakers, letting them warn for tsunamis, evacuations, and shelter-in-place situations. Council members expressed concerns about the need for testing an emergency warning siren, and, for "smart" sirens, the ability of residents to make out the words. However, during their discussion, city council members considered that Orinda residents are sophisticated and aware of impending conditions. In the event of a siren warning, the council believed that residents would then pursue further information before acting.

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