

Memorandum

To: Orinda MOFD 2X2 Fire Prevention Subcommittee
By: Nick Waranoff
Subject: There Are Fatal Flaws and Omissions in the City's Wildfire
Evacuation Analysis
Dated: August 9, 2023 for Meeting August 14, 2023

Introduction

There are potentially fatal flaws and omissions in the City's evacuation analysis. These flaws and omissions were identified by Chief Winnacker in response to a request from the City staff for comment. But the Chief's criticisms were withheld from the Council by staff, notwithstanding the Chief's request that his comments be forwarded to the Council. His most notable criticism was that the evacuation analysis did not model fire spread, and hence over-estimated the capacity of the evacuation routes.

This danger from inadequate evacuation routes will only be exacerbated by the redevelopment planned for downtown Orinda, which was not even considered in the evacuation analysis, despite a promise that it would be considered.

The planned redevelopment of downtown ("Plan Orinda") will slow evacuation, by adding a large number of housing units (1,618) and people (over 4,500) downtown. Downtown is already a choke point or "pinch point" for evacuation.

The Environmental Impact Report ("EIR") for the planned development determined that there would be a "significant" adverse impact on wildfire response and evacuation due to the proposed development – an impact that was "unavoidable" (based on the very limited mitigation proposed).

Nevertheless, the Council approved the EIR, issuing a Statement of Overriding Considerations determining that maximizing development downtown was more important than a safer evacuation. Mitigation by redistributing a substantial portion of the new housing to locations outside of downtown was not considered.

The city needs to re-do its evacuation analysis so that the true extent of the danger is known. Also, the city should revise its downtown plan so that there is less of an adverse impact on evacuation. This can best be done by redistributing the bulk of new housing to locations away from the downtown choke points. It can be done.

The Orinda MOFD 2X2 Fire Prevention Subcommittee (“Subcommittee”) may want to consider recommending that Measure R funds be spent on (1) a valid evacuation analysis, that would analyze evacuation under current conditions as well as after the planned development downtown, and that would include modeling fire spread; and (2) mitigation measures to reduce the adverse impact on emergency response and evacuation that will result from the planned development, such as redistributing the proposed new housing.

Evacuation in the event of a wildfire is of course important. People burned to death in their cars trying to evacuate from the Tunnel (Berkeley/Oakland Hills) Fire in 1991, and more recently trying to evacuate from the Paradise Fire.

<https://bigworldtale.com/world-news/seven-burn-to-death-in-their-cars-in-paradise-as-27000-panicked-residents-of-california-town-destroyed-by-wildfires-try-to-escape-down-single-road-2/>

Evacuation from Paradise was impaired by planning decisions made by the city government, which slowed evacuation.

<https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-camp-fire-deathtrap-20181230-story.html>

Discussion

A. Orinda’s Plans for Redevelopment Downtown

Planning for redevelopment of downtown Orinda goes back many years.

In 2017, Orinda received the report it requested from the Urban Land Institute’s Technical Assistance Panel, with recommendations as to how to revitalize downtown.

<https://sf.uli.org/uli-sf-releases-latest-tap-report-city-orinda/>

The Panel was comprised of “professionals from a wide variety of disciplines reflecting diverse perspectives, including market analysis, land use and design, retail consulting, architecture, finance and development strategies, governance and policy, and real estate development.” *Ibid.* The report proposed that “Up to six 40-unit [240 unit total] mixed-use residential projects could be allowed in the Village District.” See page 24 here

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/ijrzdco tiv6h4hol8kgv2ehrcwqnc4el>

The ULI-TAP deemed the addition of 240 housing units sufficient to revitalize downtown. The report was well received. See minutes of April 11, 2017.

https://cityoforinda.org/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Minutes/_04112017-603

Beginning in 2017 (with SB 35 (Wiener)) and 2018 (with SB 828 (Wiener)), the Legislature passed dozens of bills intended to spur housing production. SB 828, in particular, required cities and counties to rezone land in their communities to permit many more homes than were then currently in their plans.

In 2020, Orinda's planning for downtown development began in earnest.

As a part of the downtown planning continuum, the City Council expressed an interest in pursuing revisions to downtown development standards by enacting a new, stand-alone downtown plan—the Downtown Precise Plan (DPP). After close consideration at the January 7, 2020 City Council meeting, the Council directed Planning staff to manage the project in-house and issue an RFP and/or request for qualifications (RFQ) for specific tasks as necessary. This officially kicked off the DPP process.

Plan Orinda: The DPP, Housing Element, & Safety Element

The DPP was developed in coordination with two other plans that pertain to the community as a whole and to downtown: The 6th Cycle Housing Element update, and the Safety Element update. Every 8 years, by State law, local jurisdictions in California must update the housing elements of their general plans. The cornerstone of this process is the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA), which establishes a minimum number of units for each jurisdiction that must be accommodated in the policies, actions and development standards contained in each housing element.

The City of Orinda's 5th Cycle Housing Element was adopted in 2015 and based on a total RHNA allocation of 227 units. For the 6th Cycle Housing Element, Orinda's RHNA numbers were established at 5 times higher than the allocation stipulated by HCD/ABAG for the City's 5th Cycle housing element.

See page 5 here:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/AdoptedDowntownPrecisePlan/file/1204772069527>

The Housing Element update and the Safety Element update were required by law. The city coordinated the process developing those legally mandated updates with its optional or voluntary Downtown Precise Plan ("DPP") – optional in the sense

that the DPP was not required by law. The combined Housing Element update, Safety Element update, and DPP were combined into a project called Plan Orinda. <https://www.planorinda.com/home> The project – Plan Orinda – required an Environmental Impact Statement (“EIR”) to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”).

Thus, Plan Orinda consists of the Housing Element, the Downtown Precise Plan, the Safety Element, and the EIR. See Staff Report for Council Meeting on January 31, 2023, page 1, here.

https://orindaca.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail_LegiFile.aspx?CssClass=&Frame=&ID=3007&MediaPosition=&MeetingID=2349

The State, acting through the Department of Housing and Community Development (“HCD”) and the Association of Bay Area Governments (“ABAG”) issued the RHNA for Orinda, which mandates rezoning for 1,359 new housing units throughout the city. The City must submit a Housing Element for approval, and later rezone as described in the Housing Element. See page 58 here.

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/RevisedHESubmittal02012023/file/1129902465993> Housing elements typically include a “buffer” which is an addition to the state mandated number.

It is very important to understand that the Housing Element includes some properties downtown and some elsewhere in Orinda; the DPP is limited to downtown; and while some properties downtown are in both the Housing Element and the DPP, some downtown properties are only in the DPP, which covers many more downtown properties than the Housing Element.

According to the EIR, Orinda plans to add 1,618 new housing units downtown. (See Draft EIR, page 17, section 2.4.3.) At 2.8 persons per housing unit (See DEIR, page 17, footnote 2), that means 4,530 new residents downtown. (Current city population is under 20,000.)

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/PlanOrindaDraftEIR/file/1016078497119>

The numbers in the EIR do not include the maximum number of additional housing units potentially available to developers under the Density Bonus Law. Final EIR, p. 3. <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/PlanOrindaFinalEIR/file/1113451323334> By contrast, an economic consultant hired by the city found that only density bonus projects were “likely feasible.” See p. 13, Figure 6 of Economic Feasibility Study, Appendix D to DPP. To read the EPS study, click on Appendices here <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/01312023ProposedDPP> and then click on

Appendix D. The DPP table of contents lists the appendices, including the EPS study, on pp. iii to

iv. <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/01312023ProposedDPP/file/1124045615927>

B. The EIR Found a “Significant” Adverse Impact on Emergency Response and Evacuation and Proposed No Meaningful Mitigation

As stated in the Executive Summary, the EIR for Plan Orinda found the planned new housing would have a “significant” adverse impact on emergency evacuation and emergency response. Impact WFR-1 at page ES-32 here.

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/PlanOrindaDraftEIR/file/1016078497119>

As discussed in Section 4.14, Wildfire, most of the city is mapped as High to Very High Fire [Hazard] Severity Zones (VHFS).” Page 4.6-23 of the DEIR here:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/PlanOrindaDraftEIR/file/1016078497119?sb=/details>

Mitigation Measures

Mitigation Measures WFR-1, WFR-2, and WFR-3, as discussed within Section 4.14, Wildfire, would be required.

Significance After Mitigation

With implementation of Mitigation Measures WFR-1, WFR-2, and WFR-3, the risk of loss of structures within the Plan Area and the risk of injury or death due to wildfires would be reduced.

However, it is possible that mitigation measures would not fully prevent a significant risk of wildfires or fully protect people and structures from the risks of wildfires in all cases. Thus, this impact would remain significant and unavoidable. No additional mitigation measures to reduce this impact to less than significant levels are feasible.” (*Ibid.*, page 4.6-24.)

In section 4.14, these impacts and limited mitigations are described in greater detail. (*Ibid.*, pages 4.14-17 through 4.14-20)

The draft EIR initially noting this impact was released September 15, 2022, but did not consider an alternative plan that would follow the ULI recommendation and only add 240 units downtown, and place the balance of the legally-required new

housing elsewhere, even though doing so would significantly mitigate the adverse impact on emergency evacuation and response that will be caused by adding 1,618 units downtown. In the four-and-one-half months from September 15, 2022, until adoption of Plan Orinda (including the EIR, DPP, and HE and Safety Element) on the last possible day, January 31, 2023, the city did not ask the EIR consultant to consider the ULI recommendation of a much smaller amount of development downtown, as an alternative.

The only mitigation of this significant impact is limited to the parcels identified in the Draft EIR as “Housing Element Sites HE-4 and HE-5”. (*Id.*) These sites are a portion of Miramonte High School and the site commonly referred to as the CalTrans or Gateway site. See page 3-2 here. <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/PlanOrindaDraftEIR/file/1016078497119>

C. The Safety Element

“The Safety Element is a state-mandated General Plan element that must identify potential natural and human-created hazards that could affect the City of Orinda’s (City’s) residents, businesses, and services. The purpose of the Safety Element is to establish a framework that anticipates these hazards and prepares the community to minimize exposure to these risks.” See page 1 here: <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/AdoptedSafetyElement2023/file/1133060470014>

Adoption of the Safety Element is a required discretionary approval “in conjunction with the Housing Element Update, the DPP, and changes to the other General Plan Elements.” Draft EIR, page 2-21, here: <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/PlanOrindaDraftEIR/file/1016078497119>

The evacuation analysis included in the Safety Element, and referenced in the EIR, projects an estimated **one to two hours to evacuate, as a wildfire approaches and spreads**. See pp. 19-20 here. <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/AdoptedSafetyElement2023/file/1135153981182>

Gridlock would, of course, add to the time to evacuate. During the Paradise fire, and the Tunnel Fire (Berkeley/Oakland Hills), many lives were lost as people were stuck in their cars attempting to evacuate.

D. Council Approved Plan Orinda

Despite this risk of loss of life, identified in the EIR, due to slow evacuation in the event of a wildfire, the city approved Plan Orinda on January 31, 2023, including the massive addition of housing downtown, adopting a Statement of Overriding Considerations, over the objections of several residents. See pp. 13-15 here: <http://orindaca.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=15&ID=1728&Inline=True> See also minutes of January 31, 2023 council meeting here: <https://orindaca.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=12&ID=1728&Inline=True>

The Council, facing the immediate deadline of having to issue its approvals that night, adopted a Statement of Overriding Considerations, finding that the Project, and the need to avoid the consequences of missing the January 31, 2023 deadline (including loss of state funding and exposure to the “builders remedy”) **overrode the adverse impact to emergency evacuation**. (See Agenda Packet for Jan. 31, 2023, Packet Pg. 28, 31 here <https://orindaca.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=2174&Inline=True> and Amended Statement of Overriding Considerations at pp. 13-15 here <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/aqrelwbwv0wc37m5hkju2o8a0sta7bup/file/1128215139043>

Notably, the Council action approving the Statement of Overriding Considerations did nothing to ameliorate the significant adverse evacuation impact, and required no significant mitigation of the “significant” adverse impact upon wildfire emergency response and evacuation. The statement of a “significant” impact on emergency evacuation and emergency response, Impact WFR-1, was unchanged in the adopted final EIR.

Notwithstanding adoption of Plan Orinda (including the Housing Element), the City has the right at this time to ask HCD to approve a revised Housing Element with a different distribution of new housing. See pp. 6-7 (“jurisdiction actions”) here: <https://www.hcd.ca.gov/community-development/housing-element/housing-element-memos/docs/sb-166-final.pdf> A revised Housing Element and DPP could redistribute new housing by adding less housing downtown and mitigate the impact on wildfire emergency response and evacuation. Unlike the potential consequences facing the Council on January 31, 2023 if it did not approve everything on that date (consequences described in the Statement of Overriding Considerations), there are no adverse consequences to asking HCD at this time to approve a change in plans.

E. The City’s Evacuation Analysis and the Suppression of Chief Winnacker’s Criticism of a Lack of Wildfire Modeling

“California Assembly Bill AB 747 (2019) requires [an evacuation plan to]: ...

- “Identify evacuation routes and their capacity, safety, and viability under a range of scenarios.” See slide 5 here:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/jxstlqa5ce5utn4il5avw1lw32clmu52>

One of the goals is to “Assess evacuation for current residential population and buildout of Housing Element opportunity sites and sites within Downtown Precise Plan (DPP)” (*Ibid.*)

As explained below, the evaluation of evacuation for current residents was flawed; Chief Winnacker’s criticism was suppressed and not disclosed to the City Council; and there was no evacuation analysis for the proposed buildout downtown. (Note: “opportunity sites” refers to some sites in the Housing Element.)

1. City Staff Solicited and then Suppressed Chief Winnacker’s Criticism of the Evacuation Analysis

[Note: the following section is based on emails found here:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/hz1ornbsbprc7jy5awyvew827q39jk6h> except that Chief Winnacker’s comments in the margin of the draft evacuation analysis, and the responses of “agiffin” are in the attached document. “agiffin” is Alison Giffin of Placeworks. See slide 2 here:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/jxstlqa5ce5utn4il5avw1lw32clmu52> See also <https://placeworks.com/team/allison-giffin/>]

City staff solicited and obtained, but staff suppressed and concealed from the Council, scathing and important input from Fire Chief Winnacker.

On October 21, 2022, Planning Director Buckley sent an email to MOFD, soliciting its comments on the draft AB 747 evacuation analysis. On Nov. 1, 2022, Chief Winnacker responded by email:

The fire scenarios do not appear to include modeled spread. In the absence of an understanding of both the spatial and temporal factors associated with a dynamic event, the analysis appears incomplete as it may not include impacts to the very evacuation routes that are being analyzed.

Chief Winnacker also made comments in the margin of the draft itself. In response to Chief Winnacker's concerns, the consultant, Placeworks, confirmed, "wildfire behavior is not modeled in this analysis."

In a second email to Planning Director Buckley, after the evacuation analysis had been revised, Chief Winnacker wrote on November 7, 2022:

A quick review of the updated report suggests several questions such as the conditions used for the wildfire scenarios do not appear to have been answered.

I noted this caveat included on page 13: 'Because wildfire behavior is not modeled in this report, the analysis assumes that all intersections are fully operational during an evacuation.' If this is correct, and the wildfire scenarios assume a fire limited to the triangle shown on the map, without regard to potential spread over time, I must reiterate my previous concern that the report does not faithfully represent what will likely occur during an actual fire. I would ask that MOFD's concern regarding this gap be relayed to the council during your presentation.

Wildfire is very dynamic and when long range spotting is included (as referenced in the report) it is very unlikely that a fire will remain in the area of origin. Further, if this were the case, there would be no need for evacuations. Given the proximity of our major (an only) evacuation routes to areas of high fuel loading and the potential for Wx/topographical alignment as shown in the CWPP, I am concerned that a report which does not consider wildfire spread may lead to assumptions of a roadway's capacity to handle evacuation traffic levels which are simply not accurate. In addition to the spread of fire, as mentioned in my previous comments smoke and ember impacts on intersections during a Diablo fire event are likely to be significant. In the absence of fire modeling, or even the weather parameters which were used for each scenario, it is not possible to answer these questions.

Reference is made on page 27 to all evacuation routes being assumed to be in service during wildfire scenario 2. This does not appear to address my question of what modeling was used to confirm that such a fire did not impact Rheem.

The specific “presentation” that was the subject of the email exchange between Mr. Buckley and Chief Winnacker was the November 15, 2022 presentation. Here is a link to that presentation:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/jxstlqa5ce5utn4il5avw1lw32clmu52>

Although there were a total of four (4) presentations by staff between Chief Winnacker’s emails and the City Council’s adoption of the evacuation plan on January 31, 2023, and although several of the presentations made reference to MOFD (falsely implying MOFD approval of the plan), in fact Chief Winnacker’s concerns were never included in the presentations to the Planning Commission and City Council or incorporated in the evacuation plan.

Although wildfire modeling might seem exotic, it is not. As explained in a recent case, “To develop the plan and select the project locations, the University used fuel models to predict fire behavior on the Hill Campus. The modeling considered factors such as predicted flame length, rate of spread, crown fire activity, and maximum spotting distance, along with the vegetation in a particular location — e.g., oak-bay woodland, eucalyptus forest, and coniferous forest. The EIR contains figures showing vegetation and fuel distribution in the project areas and the predicted crown fire activity under certain weather conditions.” *The Claremont Canyon Conservancy v. The Regents of the University of California* (First District No. A165012 filed June 9, 2023), at pp 10-11.

<https://www.courts.ca.gov/opinions/documents/A165012.PDF>

Rob Bonta, California’s Attorney General, also recommended modeling in his October 2022 guidance:

“To understand how a project may exacerbate the risk of wildfire, an EIR should qualitatively assess these variables and also use fire modeling and other spatial and statistical analyses to quantify the risks to the extent feasible. Experts should utilize fire models to account for various siting and design elements, as well as a variety of different fire scenarios. The modeling should include scenarios for fires that start in, near, and far from the project site, as well as extreme weather conditions that exacerbate fire spread.” See p. 9 here: <https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/attachments/press-docs/Wildfire%20guidance%20final%20%283%29.pdf>

(Note, however, that General Bonta’s general wildfire guidance (other than endorsing modeling) is not really applicable to Orinda. He favors infill

development, which may make sense elsewhere, but not when the existing downtown is the choke point. And he doesn't address the fundamental issue of how to address a conflict between state-mandated RHNA and safe emergency response and evacuation in the event of a wildfire.)

The evacuation analysis needs to be revised to model wildfire spread.

2. Contrary to the Stated Goal, the Evacuation Analysis Did Not Include the Proposed “Buildout” of Downtown Orinda

The evacuation analysis DID NOT assess evacuation for the “buildout” or redevelopment of downtown Orinda.

It was based on “each household” or “residential parcel.” See page 9 and Figure 4 on page 10 here:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/SEEvacAnalysis/file/1060925905044>

It simply didn't take into account new residential development of 1,618 new housing units or households downtown, which of course being multi-family, would be built on few parcels.

This is confirmed by Planning Director Drummond Buckley's response on January 26, 2023 to an email from Michele Jacobson sent January 21, 2023 (copy attached).

Drummond,

Following the last Planning Commission meeting, two issues crystallized that I hope you can help me on: 1. Please confirm that the Evacuation Analysis (which analyzed the segments and intersections along identified possible evacuation routes that are likely to be the most congested during an evacuation event) did NOT calculate the added traffic to be expected from the development proposed in the Downtown Precise Plan. In re-reading the report, it appears that the number of cars assumed to be on the roads in an emergency are based on the number of existing parcels in the study area and do not make an assumption about the future parcels planned in the DPP or Housing Element Update. The report mentions 644 future units expected in the the downtown, but only to point out that these units will not be constrained as they will have easy access to Hwy 24. I could find nothing about how evacuation of those new residents will affect the evacuation of existing residents.

Response: Your understanding is correct that the analysis does not measure how much more affected other zones or neighborhoods would be in terms of exact drive times with buildout of the Downtown Precise Plan compared to estimated drive-times at current population levels. The report does identify specific pinch points at the access ramps to SR-24 from Moraga Way and Camino Pablo as well as at several key intersections in the Downtown area and provides recommendations for capital improvements to address these pinch-points. This report is meant to be a more city-wide programmatic study to identify and address potentially constrained locations.

Thus, it cannot be disputed that the Evacuation Analysis was a baseline or current conditions analysis that did not take into account the planned buildout of the Downtown Precise Plan.

Also, it didn't take into account evacuation of the employees and customers of the retail and restaurant businesses downtown.

As such, it failed to fulfill its stated goal to "Assess evacuation for current residential population and buildout of Housing Element opportunity sites and sites within Downtown Precise Plan (DPP)" See slide 5 here:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/jxstlqa5ce5utn4il5avw1lw32clmu52>

As part of the EIR, it failed to perform the required evaluation of the environmental impact of the "buildout," but perhaps deemed doing so unnecessary after determining that the current or baseline condition already had a "significant" adverse impact on emergency response and evacuation, that was "unavoidable" even with the minor proposed mitigations.

F. Lawsuit Challenging Approval of Plan Orinda and the City's Refusal to Participate in a Free Mediation

On or about March 2, 2023, a group of Orinda residents called Orindans For Safe Emergency Evacuation ("OSEE") filed a lawsuit challenging the EIR. (I am not a member of the group and do not speak for it.

That case is set for trial/hearing on December 7, 2023.

The City has refused to participate in a free mediation that might resolve the dispute. <https://www.cc-courts.org/civil/mediation.aspx>

The parties could choose a retired justice from the Court of Appeal: Justice Rivera or Justice Bruiniers. <https://www.cc-courts.org/civil/docs/Active-Mediators-Expertise.pdf>

Each decided over 25 CEQA cases. Justice Rivera also practiced in this area before taking the bench. <https://www.adrservices.com/neutrals/rivera-maria/>

It won't cost much to participate; written submissions are limited to five pages. The City could submit a one pager saying it thinks the case lacks merit, if it so chooses.

Even if the City were to win the case, the evacuation problems would remain. Speaking as a retired lawyer who participated in hundreds of mediations, and who was named to the Best Lawyers in America list, a mediation is an inexpensive and effective way to resolve all of the issues.

Hardball tactics won't solve the emergency response and evacuation issues.

Why is the City refusing to mediate? The discussion is secret, having been held in closed session. But one can speculate that the fact that the City is being represented by the same law firm in which the City Attorney is a partner, is a factor. The City is not receiving independent, unbiased advice.

G. Redistribution of New Housing as a Mitigation

Orinda *could* satisfy the state mandate to zone for an additional 1,359 units even if it placed only 240 new units downtown; it could place most of the rest at a new village that could be created on a vacant, 10-acre site near the Caldecott Tunnel, currently owned by CalTrans. See attached spreadsheets using 60% and 80% realistic capacity. The California Department of Housing and Community Development has directed the city to pursue the development of this site. See bottom of page 1 here.

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/HCDComplianceLetter03302023/file/1178344296349>

A new village on this site could have high density housing for all income levels, as well as retail, restaurants, and service businesses that would also serve the Wilder community. The church sites south of downtown, and a site at Miramonte, could

also contain some new housing, as is currently planned and as has been approved by the State, at a density of 25 units/acre and a 36 foot height limit.

Obviously, limiting new housing downtown would substantially mitigate the significant, adverse impact on emergency evacuation and emergency response that will be caused by the current plan.

Conclusion and Action Items

The Subcommittee should consider recommending that funds be spent on (1) a valid evacuation analysis, that would analyze evacuation under current conditions as well as after the planned development downtown, and that would include modeling fire spread; and (2) mitigation measures to reduce the adverse impact on emergency response and evacuation that will result from the planned development.

‘This whole town of Paradise knows what they’re feeling’

Survivors of California’s deadliest wildfire relive trauma through devastation in Hawaii



A man walks through the wildfire wreckage in Lahaina, Hawaii, on Friday. Hawaii emergency management records show no indication that warning sirens were sounded. People ran for their lives as their historic town was wiped out. RICK BOWMER — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



Abandoned cars that were burned during the Camp Fire as their owners evacuated remain on Skyway in Paradise on Nov. 10, 2018. Survivors of the deadly fire in Paradise are reliving the trauma by seeing scenes from Lahaina. RANDY VAZQUEZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Image



By Julia Prodis Sulek

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Tamra Fisher forced herself to stop watching the harrowing videos of the wildfire racing through Maui. The sense of doom was overwhelming her.

She has videos of her own terrifying escape from fire, the ones her trauma counselor has urged her to avoid. Nearly five years ago, from the driver's seat of her bright yellow VW, stuck in paralyzed traffic, her phone camera captured the smoke turning day to night as she fled the deadliest wildfire in California history, the Camp Fire in her hometown of Paradise. It recorded her chilling screams — “Move! Move!” — that

no one could hear and the man named Larry in a big white truck who rescued her and her three elderly dogs panting in the back seat.

This week, when she watched the video of two men fleeing Lahaina in their car, the smoky skies, the sheets of glowing orange embers, the driver gasping and honking, she knew it had to be her last.

“I was panicking for him. I wanted to put my foot on the gas for him,” Fisher said in an interview Friday with the Bay Area News Group. “Your whole car is going up. You can’t touch windows. And they didn’t know what was happening. Just like I didn’t know what was happening.”

But no one knows better what the survivors of Hawaii’s deadliest natural disaster are going through — and what lies ahead — than the thousands of Californians who have endured the same.

“This whole town of Paradise knows exactly what they’re feeling,” Fisher said. “It was fast. It was brutal. They just had to go with their gut. And some didn’t make it.”

Three of California’s top five deadliest wildfires have occurred since 2017. Seven of the state’s top 10 most destructive wildfires have occurred since 2015. None was deadlier than the Camp Fire.

In the ridge-top town of Paradise, 85 people died in 2018 when the inferno ripped through without warning on the morning of Nov. 8, 2018, just as bus drivers were dropping off children at school. Of the 18,000 homes, only 2,000 survived. A town once home to 27,000 people now has no more than 9,000 — the stalwarts who returned and rebuilt, even though the commercial corridor remains nearly empty and officials from the local hospital that was destroyed announced they won’t build a new one.

The death toll in Maui, where winds from a distant hurricane fanned the flames, climbed to 67 Friday and still is expected to grow. Many died fleeing in their vehicles. Dozens plunged into the ocean for safety. Nearly the entire oceanfront town of Lahaina, a historic district and tourist mecca known for its ancient banyan tree with arms spanning an entire block, has been leveled.

And the smoke still hasn't cleared.

In the hearts and souls of many Paradise survivors, it may never. Residents often talk about sleepless nights and nightmares, intense anxiety and anger, guilt, depression and claustrophobia.

Carole Wright had to leave church early one Sunday when everyone around her rose to sing a hymn, but she felt boxed in and panicked.

"I nearly was leapfrogging over these benches," she said.

She, too, had been stuck on the main road out of Paradise, with the fire around her so hot, the heat seared her skin and deflated her tires. She considered getting out and running but decided to stay in her car. If she was going to die, she told herself, she hoped she would pass out first. She drove out five hours later on metal rims. When she saw daylight piercing through the smoke, she remembers, she started to cry.

"My fear isn't fire," she said. "It's getting trapped."

Her husband, Travis, who was at home that morning, narrowly escaped on a four-wheel ATV. But he carries guilt about the death of one of his neighbors, who rode alongside him with his wife on their own quad but was overcome by fire.

His own house, made with cement shingles and protected by other neighbors who saved it to save themselves, survived.

"I could have just told everyone to stay at our house," he said.

It needed significant reconstruction — the shingles remained but the walls inside burned — and their once wooded property with 160 ponderosa pine is now so sunbaked they had to purchase blinds for every window.

"People try to make us feel better and say, 'Oh well, at least you have a view now,' " Carole said. "But I liked my view before."

In their rebuilt house across town, Richard and Zetta Gore now have a view from their front porch of Butte Canyon, where they abandoned their truck and the two Bibles inside on that apocalyptic morning and slid down the side of the bluff to

escape the flames. Turkeys and deer ran alongside them as they fled. They have returned several times with family to show them the route of their 7-mile hike to safety and wonder, “Did we really do that?”

They replaced their two-story handcrafted home with a simple, one-story one on the same spot. It’s as much as their insurance claim would allow.

Still, they are grateful.

“Every time we leave the house we pray, ‘Lord, take care of our house’ because we’ve learned — you leave, and you don’t know if you’ll ever see it again,” Zetta said. “It’s true. It has affected us in that way.”

And it makes them especially empathetic to those suffering in Maui.

“There’s so many points that were identical to what happened here in Paradise,” Richard Gore said. “But we do know that they will rise again because Paradise has. They’ll get through it.”

Civic groups from Paradise, including the Rotary Club, already have reached out to Maui with offers to help. Town Councilmember Steve “Woody” Culleton said in email to Maui’s mayor and sent it Thursday morning.

Culleton choked up when he read it aloud.

“As a resident of Paradise CA and a survivor of the 2018 Camp Fire storm I and our community know what you folks are going through,” he wrote.

His family ran for their lives that November morning — he and his wife were stuck in separate cars miles apart — and lost everything they owned.

But there’s a reason to have hope, he wrote.

“The truth I can share is that even though it is devastating when everything you own and your home and routine and community are destroyed,” he wrote, “it is possible to come back and rebuild.”

Two weeks ago, Fisher began doing just that. She and her boyfriend moved back to Paradise. They bought a lot with a converted garage that had been spared by the 2018 fire and hope to one day build a house where the old one stood.

Maui holds a special place for her. The last time she saw her father, two years before he died, they had rented a condominium in Lahaina in 2011. The day she left, father and daughter enjoyed a picnic under the sprawling banyan tree.

She is taking her therapist's advice to avoid fire videos, but still she scrolls through Facebook where she read a plaintive post from an old Paradise High School friend who moved to Maui years ago.

"Please pray for me," it said.

"It's hard not to think about other people's pain and suffering, but I'm trying to pull myself away," she said. "And then I will wait and I will ask my friend what can I do to help her because I do want to help a fire survivor. That's what we do."

Staff writer Andre Biyk contributed to this report.



Researchers Long Warned Of Lahaina's Wildfire Risk

BY DAN FROSCH AND JIM CARLTON

Nearly a decade before a wildfire destroyed the coastal Maui town of Lahaina this week, killing at least 67 people, a report by Hawaiian fire researchers warned the area was at extremely high risk of burning.

Another report, in 2020, tied fires to winds from a passing hurricane—similar to the ones that fanned the Lahaina blaze. And the state's electric utility had for years worried wildfire risk in the area. It even flew drones to monitor conditions.

Yet local authorities said in the aftermath of this week's devastation that though they knew wildfires were becoming more frequent in Hawaii, they weren't prepared for one to roar through Lahaina.

The fire hit the coastal town so quickly and caught officials so off-guard that emergency sirens didn't sound. Many panicked residents were unable to flee on the town's one clogged highway and took boats or swam to safety, if they were able to escape at all.

In 2014, a wildfire protection plan for the area was written by the Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization, a nonprofit that works with government agencies. It warned Lahaina was among Maui's most fire-prone areas because of its proximity to parched grasslands, steep terrain and frequent winds.

The plan, which involved Maui and state officials, laid out a multitude of mitigation measures that needed to be undertaken to shield the area around Lahaina from fires. They included thinning vegetation in populated areas, improving wildfire response capabilities and working with landowners and utilities to help reduce fire risk on their property.

Some of the recommendations from the 2014 plan, which was devised after more than a half-dozen community meetings, were implemented, like brush-thinning efforts and public education for landowners, said the report's lead author *Please turn to page A10*

Death toll hits 67; rescue effort continues..... A10



From: Michael Bowen <mebowen@sbcglobal.net>
Date: Tuesday, November 14, 2023 at 11:27 PM
To: Darlene Gee <Dgee@cityoforinda.org>, Latika Malkani <lmalkani@cityoforinda.org>
Cc: Inga Miller <IMiller@cityoforinda.org>
Subject: Orinda-MOFD 2x2

Councilmembers Gee and Malkani,

Thank you and your colleagues very much for the keen intellectual engagement the Council is attempting to bring to current discussions with MOFD. It is sorely needed, and deeply appreciated. I hope it helps.

I very much regret missing tonight's meeting. My father passed away Sunday, and I was unable to attend. However, I have read much of the information, and followed this matter closely.

There is so much about it I find regrettable. Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of it is that through unsupervised executive aggression and lax oversight by the board, MOFD has gone from being perhaps the greatest unifying entity in Orinda to one of the most divisive.

Perhaps the most curious element of the "dialogue" such as it is, is the way Chief Winnacker and his acolytes demonize citizens who stand up for what most Orindans hold dear; our beautiful surroundings. Yes, we all love great schools, but if that was all we cared about, we'd move to Fountain Hills, Arizona, a low fire risk community in the Sonoran Desert.

MOFD's treatment of EBRPD, EBMUD, and us private citizens is divisive, appalling, unprofessional and embarrassing. What is worse, it is entirely unnecessary. It didn't need to be this way. Marin, a far more "engaged" and litigious community took the time to engage citizens meaningfully, and provide best management practices to ensure environmental enhancement concurrent with fuel management and fire risk reduction. Because they play well together, Marin receives untold millions in state funds to manage fire risk and fuel load in a way that is satisfying to fire district and environmentalist alike.

I work for a state agency that dispenses some of those millions on fuel management projects. Full disclosure: We have provided a modest grant to MOFD. We also provide grantees with free CEQA consultation and guidance on environmental compliance through a contract with a consulting firm. Almost willfully, MOFD has opted not to avail themselves of that service, arguing in effect that they needn't comply with basic environmental guidelines.

Instead, MOFD did what many an ill-advised entity has done over the years: Bury its head in the sand, and await a lawsuit. The fact that MOFD opted to spend \$125,000 on Downey-Brand, one of the costliest law firms around, to fight an entirely avoidable CEQA challenge is what Torstein Veblein called "trained incapacity." The district is now demonstrably more interested in inventing reasons why things CAN'T be done, than in working together to solve problems rationally and cooperatively.

I don't know what to offer, but I do hope that you understand that the criticisms of MOFD --and the litigation--are not the words and deeds of some tree-hugging kook; they reflect the concern of many who love our community and its surroundings, seek greater safety, and understand that a problem 150-years in the making will not be solved by simply cutting down every combustible item in sight by Wednesday.

I predict that within a year or two Chief Winnacker will be gone. But we will be left with the discord, discontent and environmental havoc that he and MOFD have wrought. I hope that more constructive dialogue and cooperation lays ahead.

All the best and best of luck to all of you!

Very sincerely, and appreciatively,
Michael Bowen