To: SSTOC
From: Steve Cohn
Subject: Public Comment
Date: March 11, 2026

The SSTOC should focus its efforts on wildfire prevention.

While the commission has the broader directive of looking at all "essential services" (wildfire prevention and evacuation, disaster preparedness, road and storm drain maintenance), the tax was sold to the residents as a wildfire prevention tax (graphically with infrastructure mentioned in the "fine print").

An individual grant program (as currently structured or enhanced) and a group grant program (as proposed by FSMO) are both great but they are not going to solve the problem. The current program, in existence for three years, has granted less than $200,000 to 279 grantees. Over the past year only 97 grants, totaling $76,000, were issued. Even though it was reported that these grants supported $350,000 of work, this is a fraction of the amount needed to seriously reduce the risk of wildfire in Orinda. A group program, as proposed by FSMO, has to increase activity but will it be substantial?

And will it be effective? Orinda has no means to measure wildfire risk so until a means is developed, the effectiveness of vegetation mitigation will remain unknown.

The major risk of wildfire is the risk of a fast-moving fire. Fire spreading faster than people can evacuate. A major contributor to the spread is "ember cast" moved by the wind. In the recent deadly fires in Sonoma, Paradise and LA, sustained winds of 70mph with higher gusts were recorded. The Sonoma-Tubbs fire traveled 12 miles in the first 3-4 hours (about 3.5mph on average). The Paradise-Camp fire traveled 7.5 miles in the first 1.5 hours (5mph). That may not seem fast, but these fires "leapfrog" so there is fire behind you, then in front. (Note: The recent Ladris evaluation assumed fire spread of between 0.06 and 0.30mph - https://www.saferorinda.info/ladris-evacuation-feb-2026).

What generates the embers are specific species of plants and building materials once structures get involved. Orinda's problem is not that we have too little "good" vegetation, but that we have too much BAD vegetation. The current plant guide (https://orindaready.com/DocumentCenter/View/4624/Orinda-Plant-Guide-2nd-Edition-2025) has a list of 24 tree species, 19 perennials and shrubs, and 9 grasses on its "fire-prone" plant list (listed on page 50, not page one).

What if, in addition to giving out grants, the city (and MOFD?) was more proactive and offered to simply remove, for free, any tree on the list? Take both the financial and the logistical problem away from the property owner? Note, these trees are a PUBLIC hazard. Probably more so for "adjacent" (up to a half mile away) residents than the owner of the property the offending tree is on. Using public funds to remove them is not unreasonable. Just like we each pay $750 a year in parcel tax to operate the sanitary sewer system (over $5 million a year from Orindans) for the common good regardless of how many people are on the property.

But are the funds available? The answer is yes.

Over six years (2025-2030) Measure R is projected to generate $24 million in revenue with $18 million in expenses ($1.5 million for road maintenance, $7 million for storm drains, $4 million for vegetation mitigation, $500,000 for wildfire prevention education, and $5 million for “other”). Leaving $6 million “left over” on top of the $6 million currently available.

While infrastructure is important, it must be noted that the city also has an additional $17 million of revenue available for roads and storm drains from other sources over those six years. And the latest road report (the P-TAP) states that if the city spent $1.6 million per year ($10 million over 6 years), its average road condition would only drop from 83 PCI (highest in the Bay Area) to 81.

Roads and storm drains are important, but no one ever died from a pothole (and an 81 PCI does not have potholes). 166 people have died in wildfires in California over the past 10 years.

And then there is the elephant in the room that no one will discuss. Who naturally should be in charge of fire issues? Our fire department, MOFD. Over the six years in question, $169 million in property taxes from Orinda properties are projected to go to support MOFD. Over that time period, MOFD projects that it will cost (only) $133 million to provide service to Orinda. The remaining $36 million will go into reserves (already at $60 million) and to subsidize services in Moraga.

Bottom line, there is plenty of money to fund a significant vegetation mitigation program starting with the worst of the worst.

The SSTOC is the city’s wildfire prevention advisor. It needs to advise a much more aggressive program than has been currently implemented.