

WILDFIRE PREVENTION IN ORINDA

The story of wildfire prevention in Orinda should have started in 1991 after the disastrous Oakland Hills Firestorm (the Tunnel Fire) which destroyed 3,300 homes and killed 25 people. Orinda was lucky 33 years ago that this fire did not start a few miles to the east. Will its luck hold?

Fast forward 26 years to 2017. The Tubbs fire destroys 2,600 homes and kills 22 in Sonoma County and Santa Rosa. A year later the disastrous Camp Fire destroys the town of Paradise and kills 85. Both fires were spread by 50-70 mph winds, an effect of global warming which will continue.

Still, nothing is happening in Orinda except by 2020 the City Council is looking forward to completing the maintenance of its infrastructure, roads and storm drains. The deferred maintenance of the roads is finished, and they are now the best roads in the Bay Area. But the roads need to be maintained, and the storm drains still require \$30 million of repairs. So, the Council proposes doubling the half cent sales tax to 1% and extending it for another 20 years.

To verify that residents would vote for the tax, [the city conducted a survey](#) in February 2020 and included a question about residents' priorities for the tax, focusing on roads and storm drains but tossing out other options, including wildfire prevention. To their surprise (dismay?) wildfire prevention (and emergency preparedness) outpolled roads and storm drains two-to-one.

So, the infrastructure tax became an "essential services" tax, with the essential services including wildfire prevention and emergency preparedness in addition to road and storm drain maintenance. The citizens group selling the tax emphasized the wildfire prevention aspect ([graphically](#)), downplaying roads and storm drains, and the Orinda Firewise group took out an [ad portraying the tax as strictly wildfire prevention](#). Mother Nature kicked in her support by drowning Orinda in smoke for a few weeks from nearby fires in the summer of 2020, and the tax passed in November 2020. However, there was apprehension by some that the tax wouldn't be used as advertised, which was possible because it was structured as a general tax.

At the first meeting of the mandated citizen oversight commission, the SSTOC (Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission), the mayor instructed the commission "that the bulk of the sales tax measure funds for the next several years is expected to be devoted to the development and implementation of fire prevention and disaster preparedness plans."

Yet, as time progressed, the bulk of the nearly \$4 million the tax was generating annually was allocated to the initial tax target, roads and storm drains. [By January 2024](#) the money spent and projected to be spent over the first five years of the tax showed 2/3 being spent on roads and storm drains, not wildfire prevention. Of the \$20 million collected, only \$3 million would be spent on actual fuel mitigation. The reason

being, the city had no wildfire prevention plan, was relying on the SSTOC (which was comprised of well-meaning residents who had no background in wildfire prevention) to create a plan, but the city provided them with no professional assistance. And the city staff, focusing on roads and storm drains, undermined some of their proposals.

In the spring of 2022 Dr. John Radke, a UC Professor with 30 years of wildfire modeling and prevention expertise, and an Orinda resident for those 30 years, met with the SSTOC to describe what would be needed for Orinda to better protect itself from a disastrous wildfire. The SSTOC asked him to give them a proposal to create a plan. In July Radke, in conjunction with UCB's Center for Catastrophic Risk Management, **presented a proposal**. In August the SSTOC discussed the proposal and voted to recommend it to the City Council for approval and funding (\$600,000; two months of Measure R revenue which had accumulated over \$5 million by this point).

However, minutes after the commission voted to recommend the proposal for a wildfire preparedness plan, the City Manager, David Biggs, who knew no more about wildfire prevention than what he had heard at SSTOC meetings (he had never spoken with Radke independently, nor with any other wildfire expert other than possibly MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker), told the commission that he would advise the Council to reject the proposal. He offered no reasons for his opposition and the commissioners were so shocked by the announcement, they did not ask for reasons.

The proposal was presented to the full Council on October 11, 2022. The SSTOC chair presented the commission's recommendation. Then the City Manager Biggs presented his opposition. His reasons for objection included the assertion that the proposal was "pure research" (by Radke who had been engaged in this research for 30 years and utilized modeling software (FlamMap) to predict fire intensity and spread that had been in use by the industry since 2006; hardly "pure research"). An additional "rationale" provided by Biggs was that Orinda had "other priorities" for Measure R revenue, obviously being road and storm drain maintenance, the only other "essential services" meant to be supported by Measure R revenue.

Biggs went on to say that while he opposed the proposal, he had applied for a grant to partially (75%) fund the proposal, with the City paying the matching 25% (\$150,000). So, despite the fact he claimed the proposal was "pure research" (implying lack of value?) plus other reasons the SSTOC was wrong about in its recommendation, it was still worth spending \$150,000 of city funds on the project. A mixed message which confused the members of the City Council (who also knew nothing about wildfire prevention), so they did not reject the proposal but deferred opining until they found out if the grant proposal came through.

The grant proposal was not accepted. But neither Biggs nor the SSTOC ever brought the proposal for a professionally created wildfire prevention plan back to the Council for reconsideration. In the meantime, millions of Measure R funds were being spent on roads and storm drains, very little on wildfire prevention, virtually nothing on actual fuel mitigation.

This is not to say that the city has done nothing with regards wildfire prevention over the past three years:

- The city funds a chipper program to help residents dispose of vegetation they remove themselves.
- The city spends funds each year keeping its own property (supposedly) fire safe (it has never been modeled, except possibly by the insurance companies).
- The city created an incentive grant program in October 2022, allocating \$400,000 as incentive for residents to remove vegetation from their properties. The grants were limited to \$599 and had to be match funded by the resident. In May 2024 the maximum grant was increased to \$1,000. Through August 2024, after almost two years, 137 grants (to 2% of the total residential parcels), totaling \$77,328 (1% of Measure R revenue generated over that period), had been awarded.
- The city creates brochures and publishes matter advising people on how to make their property fire safe.

What the city has not done is create any means to measure the fire risk in the city, neither its magnitude nor whether it is improving or getting worse.

What about MOFD? MOFD's main focus has been to create fire code which should reduce risk and inspect for compliance. The shortfall of this program is it only inspects for compliance from the street, saying it doesn't have the power to "go into people's backyards". And while the fronts of homes may be "manicured" and code-compliant, the problem generally lies in the untended "acreage" behind the homes.

Both Orinda and MOFD encourage neighborhoods to organize Firewise units to decrease the wildfire risk on each member property.

All of these actions put the onus of wildfire prevention on each of Orinda's 7,000 private property owners. Which might make the average property owner (and tax payer) to wonder, "then why did I vote for a \$4 million a year sales tax and **how are the \$23 million of my property taxes going to MOFD being spent?**"

There are indications of how well the wildfire prevention program is working 4.5 years after residents said it was priority #1 and 3.5 years after they provided the city with close to \$4 million in Measure R sales tax revenue.

In March 2024, State Farm, Orinda's largest home insurer (insuring 40% of Orinda) announce it would be canceling 72,000 policies throughout the state because of extreme wildfire risk they were not allowed to adjust rates for. By April it was known that **State Farm had cancelled 55% of its policies in Orinda** (1,700 total). Within months, other insurers had also cancelled policies, and it appeared that the only available insurance for replacement was the state's FAIR Plan. No one was insuring Orinda.

The reason was extreme fire risk, not the cost of Orinda real estate (as some claimed). State Farm canceled 55% of its policies in Orinda where the average home sale price is 2.1 million. It only canceled 12% of its policies in Moraga where the average home price is \$1.7 million. And 15% of the policies in Alamo where the average home price is \$2.5 million. Orinda's problem is wildfire risk (which the insurers do model, like Radke proposed), not just the cost of the property at risk.

The second indicator was provided by Dr. Radke. Radke has split Orinda into about 100 “firesheds”, which are gullies where fire will run and intensify. He demonstrated the **wildfire risk model in one of these firesheds**, between Scenic and Estates in South Orinda, in his 2022 proposal (page 13). He recently engaged a local brush clearing firm to “walk” this fireshed plus two others. This is not theory, it is “boots-on-the-ground” investigation of what needs to be done to make these areas fire safe.

The mitigation expert estimated what it would cost to “clean up” these three firesheds and how much to maintain them each year. The cleanup for all three came to \$346,000 with the annual maintenance being \$63,000. Extrapolating these estimates to all 100 Orinda firesheds results in a projected cleanup cost of \$11.5 million with annual maintenance of \$2 million for all of Orinda. Orinda and MOFD have the funds to provide this service, thanks to the \$4 million Measure R sales tax and the \$23 million in property taxes going to MOFD.

One of the three firesheds Radke investigated, **centered around Tiger Tail Ct** in North Orinda, is interesting. Most of the properties in this fireshed are members of a Firewise neighborhood and about 1/3 of them have been “certified” code compliant by MOFD. And yet, the estimated cost to make this fireshed fire-safe is \$192,000. What Orinda and MOFD are doing, education, grants, chippers, Firewise, codes, code compliance, is not working. At least not enough to make the area as safe as it could be.

All of the above (education, grants, chippers, Firewise, codes, code compliance) are good and necessary. If Dr. Radke had completed his modeling of Orinda four years ago and it was remodeled today (which is what the proposal suggests, continual re-modeling), a large improvement would probably be noted. But without the modeling, since all 7,000 properties cannot be “walked” every year, Orinda has no idea of the actual condition of Orinda. All it knows is that the insurers consider it uninsurable (at the rates they are required to charge) and a spot-check of three of Orinda’s 100 firesheds indicates that the insurers are correct, Orinda needs millions of dollars of additional fuel mitigation.

The required mitigation, in many if not most cases, requires the government to provide the service of identifying where mitigation is needed and in doing the actual work. Just like the government needs to orchestrate and manage the road, storm drain, and sanitary sewer systems, it needs to do the same thing for wildfire prevention. It cannot leave it to 7,000 individuals to create an effective system. And those individuals have provided it, both the City of Orinda and its fire department, MOFD, with the financial resources to do the job.