

MOFD Recommendations for Dalewood Park

The following memo summarizes the MOFD walk-throughs of Dalewood Park last year and this and the resulting recommendations, discussions and actions.

1. On December 6, 2019, the MOFD Fire Marshall, Jeff Isaacs inspected the park with several Board members and interested homeowners (Brad Wolfsen, Chris Anderson, Susan Southwick, Ron & Sue Wendt). He recommended several actions and, when asked at that time about the eucalyptus trees, he did not recommend removal, but instead that the Association should limb the bottom branches of those trees, create 18" of spacing between the oleanders and the tree trunks and a 6' air gap between the top branches of the oleanders and the bottom branches of the eucalyptus. Those recommendations were implemented.
2. On October 11, 2020, the Annual meeting of ODHA was held and several members raised concerns about the Eucalyptus trees, suggesting removal, and it was agreed that MOFD would be asked to conduct a new review of the park to update the recommendations for fire safety measures required and recommended (MOFD had updated the fire code in the summer of 2020). To that end a Board Committee was appointed to meet with Chief Winnacker and work with MOFD to update their park recommendations, including the issue with the trees. Members appointed to the committee are Brad Wolfsen, OHDA President, Chris Anderson, OHDA Treasurer, Marty Glick, OHDA Secretary and Representative of the Sundown Terrace/Silver Oak/Honeywood and Orinda View Firewise Community, Sue Wecht, representing the East Dalewood Firewise Community, and Bob Sorenson, a park neighborhood homeowner who has relevant experience and interest.
3. Separately, MOFD Director and ODOA homeowner Craig Jorgans, contacted Chief Winnacker about the eucalyptus trees in Dalewood Park, as several homeowners had raised the issue to him. As a result, Chief Winnacker did his initial solitary walk-through on Friday, October 23. Later that same day, Chief Winnacker provided in an email the results of that park visit and it is attached. In summary, his response and recommendations were:

A. Agreement with and support of Fire Marshall Jeff Isaacs' assessment made in 2019 regarding the eucalyptus trees - limbing and creating spacing but not removing the trees:

B. Additional trimming of a few branches, he noted, that were closer than 6' from the ground and where the 6' air gap between brush and tree canopies was not maintained;

C. Removal of dumped landscaping materials from the East end of the park (Sundown Terrace turn-around);

D. Removal of ivy at the intersection of Sundown & Dalewood;

E. Removal of the recently installed ground cover along Sundown Terrace;

F. Changes in fencing on Sundown to widen the car access to the park (addressed more fully below).

3. Inasmuch as the relatively spontaneous Winnaker park inspection had not provided an opportunity for any questions or input from Committee members, the Chief graciously agreed to do a second inspection visit with the Committee and that took place in the early evening on Monday, November 9. Notice to the Committee members was provided ten days in advance and all but Sorenson were able to attend and participate. Also present and participating was Ron Wecht. At that meeting, the chief reiterated the above responses and recommendations, adding:

G. Trimming of the Oleanders on the East End (near 295 Sundown) to create an 18" air gap from the group matching the work done to those that line Dalewood Drive, removal of the brush (including highly flammable coyote brush) between the oleanders and 295 Dalewood, and maintaining a 6' air gap for the oak trees on that side of the park.

H. Removal of all dumped landscaping material: a) on the West corner above the creek; b) dumped down the slope on the Southside (near the Lauterwasser Creek); c) the east side next to 295 Sundown Terrace.

The Chief was asked specific questions about brush in the creek ravine and about the Eucalyptus and responded as follows:

Any riparian area (our creek is one) includes all of the land sloping downward to the waterway and is under the purview of CEQA, the Environmental Quality Act monitored by California Fish and Game. MOFD fire regulations do not apply in areas under Fish & Game jurisdiction. The Chief indicated we should not be concerned about that because those areas remain wetter round and resist fire very well. He indicated that Fish & Game rarely provides exceptions to their own rules. Furthermore, he said that if we clean up the dumped debris and take out one dead tree at the top of the ravine we should be fine in that whole area.

As to the Eucalyptus trees, he noted that they were expensive to remove and that they provide benefits. He noted that redwoods shed and create separate issues. He said trees generally are not the problem, noting that in the Camp Fire in Paradise, Ca. - - the worst in the U.S. in a century - - trees survived it as did properly roofed structures. He said that while he often is asked questions about trees, those are not the real problem. He said the best and most effective thing our homeowner association could do would be to organize homeowners to do three things:

1. Get fire resistant roofing
2. Install screening in attic and crawlspace vents into their home so embers from a fire cannot travel through them. CERT is looking into placing a community wide order to purchase retrofit vents at bulk pricing. He said this would be an excellent time to start the discussion in the neighborhood about the benefits of these vents.
3. Create a few feet of defensible space around the border of their home (eliminate close in plantings and the "fire ladder" they otherwise provide). Trim landscaping plantings 12" above ground and remove mulch 2 feet around the perimeter of homes.

The Eucalyptus trees notwithstanding, the Chief emphasized that if exits were blocked or severely backed up with unmoving cars during a fire, the single safest evacuation area to park cars and weather the firestorm would be in Dalewood Park. In that respect, he recommended widening the access to the park by cutting back the fence (on the East along Sundown Terrace) as the turn is too tight for many drivers to make it into the park without hitting something or making a three-point turn.

Asked specifically if removal of the Eucalyptus would make the park safer, the Chief said that it would marginally in the same way that the removal of every other tree in the Downs and in Orinda would make the community safer.

He went on to say that the park is in a low-lying area serviced with the fog brought by the west winds such that there are only a couple of hours in the afternoon that a fire could likely start there and that any fire originating in the park would be quickly extinguished.

As to using the Park as a possible refuge, previous discussions with MOFD re: terms and conditions for how to practically accommodate such a plan led to indemnity issues and concerns that cars not be able to drive into Dalewood Park in non-emergency times. The Board anticipates further study of the park emergency access issue.

Firechief Winnacker's email -

I visited the site this morning following a conversation with Director Jorgens and concur with Jeff Isaac's assessment. There is minor work to be done to achieve additional fire safety summarized as follows:

1. Additional trimming to create an air gap between brush and tree canopies.
2. Trimming a small number of branches which are closer than 6' from the ground (Eucalyptus in the NW corner)
3. Maintenance to remove dumped landscaping material on the SW corner above the creek and the East side next to the neighbor's fence (295 Sundown Terrace)
4. Minor landscaping to remove ivy and the accumulation of combustible duff and litter under the Oleanders adjacent to the hydrant at Dalewood and Sundown Terrace.
5. Replacement of the shredded Western Red Cedar bark (Gorilla Fur) used as ground cover along Sundown Terrace.

I would also recommend widening the access by cutting back the fence (to the East along Sundown Terrace) as the turn is too tight for most drivers to make it into the park without hitting something or making a three point turn.

I assume the meeting is on November 11th (email below says Oct 11th), please confirm and we will have a qualified MOFD member attend.

Thank you,

Dave Winnacker
Fire Chief
Moraga-Orinda Fire District