

# Council Faces \$38 Million Wish List for \$17 Million Palos Money

By Steve Angelides

The Moraga Town Council has begun to grapple with a \$38 million wish list for \$17 million of anticipated fees from the Palos Colorados development. The Council will take another crack at the problem at its meeting on January 9, and will hold a large meeting to get more public input on the topic sometime next February.

Town Manager Phil Vince presented the wish list developed by the Town staff to the Council. It includes \$7.3 million for roads, \$7.3 million for storm drains, \$6.7 million for a gym, a \$5 million reserve, \$3.8 million for building renovations, \$2 million for open space maintenance and acquisition, \$1.5 million to pay off a pension loan, a \$1.5 million legal fund, \$1.4 million to help close a “structural budget deficit”, \$.9 million for a sports field at Rancho Laguna park, and \$.5 million for the Town’s estimated share of the regional emergency radio system.

After Vince’s lengthy presentation and comments from several of the 30 residents present, the Council struggled for an hour and a half before agreeing that it will attempt to reach tentative agreement on some of the items at its meeting on January 9, to help frame the public input at the large meeting in February.

The council members seemed to agree on at least two items. A majority of them spoke in favor of paying off the \$1.5 million pension loan, because the Town pays 7.75% interest on the loan but can only earn about 5% on money it invests. A majority also spoke in favor of setting aside a reserve fund, but they did not agree on the amount of the reserve fund. Vince has recommended a \$5 million reserve fund. Vince and some of the council members also spoke in favor of setting aside \$7.3 million for roads.

If the council were to agree on January 9 to pay off the \$1.5 million pension loan, set aside a \$5 million reserve, and set aside \$7.3 million for roads, that would amount to \$13.8 million, leaving only about \$4 million of the anticipated Palos money up for grabs at the public meeting in February. Councilmember Dave Trotter was unwilling to agree with that approach because he favors a gym which it is estimated will cost \$6.7 million.

However, Councilmember Rochelle Bird said that by using “smart debt” it might be possible to invest some of the money and use the income to pay off debt for capital projects, such as the gym, over the long term.

Vince said he had prepared a spreadsheet which illustrates some of those concepts and would make it available to council members to study.

Some of the residents who attended spoke in favor of investing the entire \$17 million of anticipated Palos money.

However, Town Treasurer Robert Kennedy stated that the Town is projecting an annual “structural budget deficit” averaging around \$200,000 beginning in 2013 and continuing thereafter. Kennedy explained that projected deficit is because property tax revenues are expected to increase only 2% per year under Proposition 13, while personnel-related expenditures are expected to increase 5% per year.

Vince told the Council that “beginning in 2013 or 2014 we will face dramatic reductions in services and personnel if we don’t find a way to reduce the deficit.” Since everyone at the meeting agreed that this Council cannot bind future Councils, that projection may make the option of spending none of the Palos money or interest until 2017 unlikely.

Regarding the \$1.5 million legal fund he is recommending, Vince explained that the Town “has made land use decisions”, that “there are initiatives coming down the pike—MOSO 2008” (the Moraga Open Space Ordinance), “which will be on the ballot in June or November”, and that “an applicant (the Bruzzone family) has sued the Town over its design guidelines.” Regarding the prospect of the Town spending legal fees to defend MOSO, Bird commented that “these initiatives get passed and then it’s on the company dime of the city to get it all sorted out.”

Toward the end of the meeting Police Chief Mark Ruppenthal made a second pitch for \$500,000 for the Town’s estimated share of the regional emergency radio system. He also asked the Council to consider spending Palos money for “one or two more police officers,” which went beyond the \$38 million wish list presented by Vince. Ruppenthal’s comments illustrate the dilemma the Council faces in selecting from a growing wish list the items on which the Town will spend the one-time Palos Colorados development fees.

In his presentation Vince included an illustration which showed that if the Town did that and spent none of the Palos money or the interest it would have over \$25 million by 2017.


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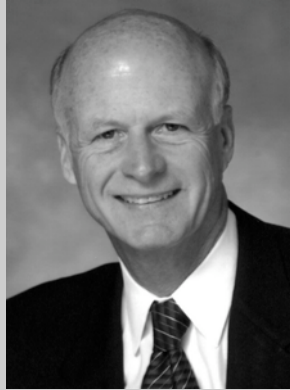
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