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Talk of the Towns

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Photo Andy Scheck

Office for police services; the Town of Moraga maintains its own police force. With the pension costs associated with the Sheriff's Office's contract projected to possibly double within the next seven years, both Lafayette and Orinda are looking for a less costly alternative to police service delivery.

Of the several different approaches to police service evaluated in the study, which included the option for a Lafayette-Moraga-Orinda police department, the lowest cost alternative for Lafayette is contracting for services from the city of Walnut Creek, according to City Manager Steven Falk. However, Falk acknowledged that there are many sources of uncertainty in the police service picture including how rapidly the County pension costs will increase and the possibility of a pension reform measure on an upcoming ballot.

Orinda's City Council was less comfortable with the financial data presented in the consultant's study. While contracting with Walnut Creek appeared to be a possible option, City Manager Janet Keeter explained that some substantial costs, such as the administrative overhead and insurance deductibles that would be part of a Walnut Creek contract, were not reflected in the study's numbers.

Moraga Town Manager Mike Segrest indicated that there is general satisfaction with the police services provided in Moraga, but he acknowledged that they face challenges with recruitment, high turnover, and limited services in the small department. Segrest explained that the Moraga Council had not seen the results of the police service study and were just beginning to be briefed on the issue.

Orinda's Mayor Tom McCormick raised the issue that the CALPERS pension program, a defined benefit program, is not offered to Orinda's staff. Thus forming a local police agency with this benefit could present an inequity among the City employees. Lafayette City Council Member Don Tatzin concurred, noting that Lafayette would face the same issue. Tatzin felt trying to recruit qualified officers without a defined benefit program, currently the standard offered by almost every city in California for law enforcement employees, could present a real hurdle.

"The quality of our services is wonderful and that is not something that we want to jeopardize," added Orinda's Vice Mayor Victoria Smith.

"Keeping the options open seems like the appropriate position through the next year," stated Lafayette's Mayor Brandt Andersson. Falk and Keeter will be meeting with the Sheriff and County Administrator in early March to discuss the ability of those offices to establish a more stable and predictable contract pricing program. Both cities will also begin to explore the option of contracting for police services with Walnut Creek.

A.Firth

Revenue

Enhancement

Item number two on the agenda was revenue enhancement options for the three communities. The primary concern for all three is

road repair, with Orinda leading the pack with a staggering \$73 million price tag (as estimated by the Citizens' Infrastructure Oversight Commission), and the dubious distinction of the worst roads in Contra Costa County. Moraga staff estimates that it would require \$2 to \$3 million a year to get the neighborhood and collector road system to a satisfying service level; the problem is that Moraga's budget for fiscal year 2009/2010 street maintenance is \$395,000. Lafayette has approximately \$15 million worth of unfunded road repairs.

City Manager Steven Falk explained that both Orinda and Lafayette were on a similar track - the cities recently completed surveys looking at options for potential ballot measures. Lafayette's survey examined voter support for becoming a Charter City - which is an entity that can levy an increased Real Property Transfer Tax ((RPTT) and keep the proceeds to spend on infrastructure. Citizens would need to approve becoming a Charter City and approve an increase in the transfer tax; both options need a simple majority to pass. The current transfer tax is \$1.10 per \$1,000 of home value, payable when a home is sold. Various levels of a RPTT were polled with solid support at \$5/\$1,000 of assessed value. Still in the early stages, it's unclear whether the Lafayette City Council will go forward with putting this measure on the ballot.

Orinda's City Manager Janet Keeter reported that their survey showed a slim majority of support for a \$50 million Infrastructure Bond Measure to fix roads, storm drains and improve safety, but it did not approach the elusive two-thirds supermajority vote necessary to pass. Other alternatives were queried: increasing the real property transfer tax, establishing a parcel tax, increasing the local sales tax, and a utility users tax. None of these garnered more than 48% support. The City Council decided to not move forward with any measure at this time.

The Town of Moraga was not as far along as Lafayette and Orinda. Town Manager Mike Segrest said the top recommendation of their Revenue Enhancement Committee was a Benefit Assessment District to deal with infrastructure. He noted that this option would require additional study and analysis and that they plan on spending the next year and a half or so to try and build grassroots understanding of Town finance and the different options available to increase revenue.

C.Tyson

Downtown

Revitalization

Orinda Council Member Amy Worth pointedly characterized the issue of downtown revitalization. "Our suburbs were developed years ago according to a similar model that now needs to evolve," she said, "we have a lot of residents who will want to downsize in the years to come while staying in Orinda, and our new young families want to see a more vibrant downtown that offer more opportunity for both shopping and recreation, accessible to pedestrians and bikers." Worth added that she believes that the three Lamorinda communities are faced with similar needs; suburbs do not want to be just a collection of bedroom communities anymore, and need a different more integrated model.

Speakers from each government talked about how they are trying to reach this objective. "We have been working on the Downtown Specific Plan for two years," said Lafayette City Manager Steven Falk, "we conducted 60 public meetings, proposed a first draft plan last year that was not so warmly received and are now in the process of restudying it. We anticipate having a draft ready in July." According to Falk, one of the difficulties is the split between one part of the population, which favors a more sustainable and compact downtown close to mass transit, and more traditional residents who are concerned about losing the charm of the downtown they love. "It is a balancing act," commented Lafayette Mayor Brandt Andersson, "people like things the way they are, but downtowns need to renew themselves."

Andersson was followed by Orinda Mayor Tom McCormick who said that with the proper mass transit and pedestrian access it is possible to increase housing density and see traffic go down. Orinda presented its plans for developing the City's downtown districts as well. The part that interested Lafayette the most was when Orinda City Manager Janet Keeter explained that the City was considering allowing building heights up to 55 feet in the downtown areas. "We will have setback rules" added Keeter, "people won't see just series of high walls."

Moraga was the only community to report that the zoning process of its downtown area is complete "as of yesterday," said Town Manager Mike Segrest, "and after seven years in the making." Council Member Mike Metcalf warned that when the process takes too long, the public interest wanes until the last minute when residents suddenly wonder what is going on. Segrest explained that Moraga's next step would be to negotiate a development agreement and try to ensure that the objectives of revitalization included in the plan actually materialize.

S. Braccini

The End

The meeting concluded with updates from each municipality. For a moment it seemed that the mood of the meeting might move from one of polite listening to lively debate when Moraga Mayor Ken Chew engaged his counterparts on the question of off-leash dog parks. "We debated the issue of our Rancho Laguna Park last night," he said, "and among the 37 members of the public who spoke, seven were from either Lafayette or Orinda. You may have a need there, do you have a project to develop such a facility?" "No," firmly answered McCormick, "you use our roads, we use your parks!" Lafayette, on the other hand, reported working on a dog park project.

Finally, the audience heard about the different ways our local governments communicate with their constituencies, emphasizing the need to educate and inform. Although all use various hard copy

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