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City Receives Free Money for Sidewalk Beautification

By Cathy Tyson

Who doesn't like to get something on sale? With a huge boost from a federal grant - brick paving, street furniture, decorative planters, stylish street lights, public art, bike racks and trash cans will beautify a portion of Mt. Diablo Boulevard for a fraction of the cost.

As part of the 2010 Capital Improvement Program, \$350,000 from the Downtown Street Lights Replacement Reserve was allocated to implement the Downtown Street Improvements Master Plan - to spruce up just one block along Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Seeking to leverage city funds, staff applied for and received a \$1,290,000 federal grant that would fund the entire Master Plan from Oak Hill Road all the way to Mt. View/Dolores Drive.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said new mayor Carl Anduri.

Streetscape architect Sudhish Mohindroo, a partner in SZFM Design Studio that worked on the Lafayette Mercantile Building and the renovation of La Fiesta Square, is the architect of the project. A preliminary design was presented to the City Council on December 13. Looking to gain acceptance of general design concepts and get clarification on two major issues was the focus of the presentation. Mohindroo analyzed the existing conditions and constraints, looking to optimize improvements without negative impacts to make the project pedestrian and bicycle friendly. The plan is not complete at the moment, detailed architectural and design work still needs to be done. February 1, 2011, is the deadline to submit a construction authorization request package to the State, or the grant money is at risk. Although there have been complaints by the public about the speed of the process - this deadline has been the driver of the schedule.

One of the challenging issues is the many driveways - five - and the general layout of the parking lot at the Trader Joe's / Diablo Foods shopping center. This and a proposed u-turn restriction at Happy Valley Road are the main issues of contention on the project. Because "bulb outs" - an extended portion of the corners at the Happy Valley intersection, to accommodate pedestrians - would spill out onto the street, this makes the available road real estate necessary to negotiate a u-turn impossible.

Bill Eames - former owner of Bills Drugs, now CVS, and Dan Stokes of Diablo Foods shook hands and agreed to look into a parking lot study, hopefully with other merchants on board, to get a better handle on circulation and parking in arguably one of the most congested lots in Lafayette.

After much public comment encouraging the City Council to keep the u-turn, a decision was made to go ahead with the planning of the project but to consider the u-turn and parking lot issues separately. Shopping center owners and merchants also hope to have a plan prior to the next City Council meeting in January.

Council members also discussed the pros and cons of a low stone wall, a hedge or a skinny iron fence with some kind of vine or greenery to separate pedestrians from the parking lot. No decision was made, but they did agree to get further information on materials options.

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