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The One Percent?

Survey results indicate Moragans may be willing to pay a bit more sales tax to fix roads

By Sophie Braccini

A small crowd joined the Moraga Town Council on May 30 to hear the results of a survey that gauged residents' support for road taxes: a general one percent sales tax, with a 20-year sunset, is likely to pass on the November ballot; a parcel tax would probably fail.

The Council took the parcel tax idea off the table, and will continue to study a sales tax for inclusion on the November ballot.

Previous study sessions determined that bringing the town's "at risk" roads up to the Bay Area average would require a \$14 million investment. To bond that kind of money would require a parcel tax, coupled with a sales tax to pay for ongoing maintenance. That was the Council's intent, but the recent poll results do not line up with this strategy.

The polling consultant, Lew Edwards Group/Godbe Research, called 5.5 percent of Moraga voters, or 302 residences, sampling 30 different categories of residents based on demographic criteria such as age, sex, and political party affiliation.

A 1.0 percent general sales tax received a 54 percent approval rate, with a margin of error of +/- 5.5 percent, while a specific parcel tax never got above 53.7 percent even at only \$58 a year. With just above 50 percent of residents supporting any form of taxation, the only type the Town can choose is a general purpose tax, meaning a tax that is not allocated a priori for a specific use; specific tax measures require a two-thirds majority in California.

"People rate street maintenance very high, higher than police services, which is quite rare," said consultant Bryan Godbe. "However, there is not a two-thirds majority in Moraga that would support a road-only tax."

In attendance was Jerry Bradshaw, the City of El Cerrito engineer who has also been serving as a consultant for the Town of Moraga. El Cerrito passed a specific tax measure for its roads with a 71 percent majority. "How did you do it?" asked resident Dale Walwark. "Two-thirds of El Cerrito voters are Democrats," answered Godbe, who also worked with the City of El Cerrito. He added that in Moraga, women tend to support tax measures more than men do.

There is no guarantee that a general tax will be used only for road repairs, a wrinkle that worried some of the Council members. "Some people may hesitate to give us a blank check," said Mayor Mike Metcalf.

Town Manager Jill Keimach explained that the Town would bond as large a part as possible of the revenue stream from the tax measure right after the election and allocate that money to road repairs. But it was not clear to any of the meeting's participants how much the Town would be able to borrow against a non-fixed revenue stream such as a sales tax and what collateral the Town could offer to secure the loan.

At an earlier meeting the Council determined that a sales tax alone would not suffice to fix Moraga's roads. "A sales tax would staunch the bleeding," said Metcalf. The Council agreed that once it has been able to prove to residents that their tax dollars are being put to good use, it would be possible to return to voters and ask for a second measure to raise additional funds.

In order to be on the November ballot, the tax measure needs to be formally approved by the Council in July.

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