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Orinda City Council Approves 10-Year Plan to Fix Roads and Drains

City hopes voters back sales tax increase

Laurie Snyder

At its July 17 meeting, the Orinda City Council paved the way for Orindans to make their voices heard again regarding the City's aging infrastructure by adopting a 10-year "Roads and Drainage Repairs Plan" and authorizing staff to place a half-cent sales tax hike measure on the November ballot.

If voters approve the initiative, Council members say Orinda's 92.5 miles of paved public roads would gradually be restored from their current overall Pavement Condition Index (PCI) ranking of 49 (poor) to a good rating of 70.

(Entirely new roads are assigned PCIs of 100.)

According to staff reports, the City's policy has been to focus its limited pavement rehabilitation dollars - about \$2.3 million per year out of a roughly \$10 million total City budget - on arterials, collectors and school routes because those streets have the most impact on residents. As a result, Orinda's 64.3 miles of non-private residential streets have dropped to an even lower PCI of 37 - poor or very poor condition.

The "City would need to spend an estimated \$52 million (in today's dollars) on pavement rehabilitation over a 10 year period," reads the staff report, in order "to bring the City's entire public road system (arterials, collectors, school routes and non-private residential roads)" up to the good PCI of 70.

Phase one would be supported by the proposed half-cent sales tax increase with funding for phases two and three covered by \$19.8 million bond or parcel taxes in 2016 and 2020. The final phase would cover ongoing maintenance. Although revenue generated by this tax increase "cannot be committed to a specific project or single purpose" since, by law, "a general sales tax must be placed in the General Fund and must be available for any and all municipal purposes," the staff report states that "this Council has expressed a desire that the money would be annually allocated for road and drainage infrastructure."

The new tax would be authorized for 10 years, would sunset in 2023, and "requires an annual audit of the sales tax, which must include the amount generated and all allocations made from the tax. Second, it requires the City Council to establish via resolution by April 1, 2013 a Citizens' Oversight Commission to review the expenditures or to assign these duties to an existing City Committee or Commission."

Currently, Orinda receives just one percent of its current 8.25 percent sales tax rate. In 2011, this amounted to roughly \$924,853. Staff estimates that, if voters agree to the tax hike, the additional revenue generated would rise from approximately \$540,000 in 2014 to \$702,000 in 2022.

As expected, Orinda Citizen Infrastructure Oversight Committee members spoke in support - as did residents who had previously voiced their opposition.

"I think we're moving in the right direction with the sales tax," said Vince Maiorana who also urged the Council to ensure that the ballot's wording will articulate that the funding generated will be used on roads in the worst shape. Richard Colman again cautioned against overtaxing citizens and stated his preference that the ballot measure require two-thirds backing by citizens rather than the 50 percent simple majority being sought, but ultimately also expressed support. "I believe that fixing Orinda's roads is a high priority."

Council Member Victoria Smith prompted chuckles as she noted that Council may have witnessed a first - a meeting at which all residents presenting their thoughts did so in favor of the overarching infrastructure improvement strategy.

Vice Mayor Amy Worth and Council Member Dean Orr were chosen to draft the language that will be used for the November ballot measure.

Multi-Phase Approach to Fund Orinda's Road and Drain Repairs

Phase 1: 2012 Half-Cent Sales Tax Measure with 10-year sunset (appropriated annually by Orinda City Council from General Fund)

Phase 2: 2016 \$19.8 Million Bond or Parcel Tax (enabling Orinda to draw down \$4.95 million annually for four years if passed by two-thirds of voters)

Phase 3: 2020 \$19.8 Million Bond or Parcel Tax (enabling Orinda to draw down \$4.95 million annually for four years if passed by two-thirds of voters; raising Orinda's PCI to 70 by 2024)

Phase 4: 2022 Extension of Half-Cent Sales Tax for ongoing maintenance (appropriated annually by Orinda City Council from General Fund)

Source: City of Orinda 10 Year Roads and Drainage Repairs Plan (Draft)

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