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Orinda Facing Solid Waste Rate Increase

By Laurie Snyder

Orinda's current garbage and recycling services are delivered via a Joint Powers Authority (JPA), which franchises solid waste services on behalf of the cities of Danville, Lafayette, Moraga, Orinda, and Walnut Creek, as well as unincorporated portions of central Contra Costa County. The board of directors of that JPA, known as the Contra Costa County Solid Waste Authority (CCCSWA), is also responsible for setting annual residential and commercial solid waste rates in those communities.

And it is those rates which are currently the subject of review by the Orinda City Council. On Dec. 18, council members learned that the CCCSWA board is considering raising Orinda's solid waste rates by an average of 2.6 percent for year nine of its 10-year franchise agreement with the city. According to reports presented to the council, the "JPA, formed in 1994 in order to provide better service and lower rates, resulted in Orinda ratepayers paying garbage and recycling rates lower than they had previously paid up until 2008."

CCCSWA's board contracts with HF&H, an independent consulting firm, "to audit the service providers' true cost of service for each jurisdiction. As a member of the CCCSWA, Orinda's revenue requirement is calculated based on the actual cost of the services." The franchise agreement also dictates that the costs of the equipment used to provide these services be amortized. If revenues are lacking in any rate year, "the shortfall will be made up during future rate setting processes" while any year-end surplus "is held in reserve to offset shortfalls in future years."

For year nine of the franchise agreement (March 1, 2013 to Feb. 28, 2014), CCCSWA projects that Orinda's revenue requirement will be \$3,704,704 with revenues estimated at \$3,854,871 - for a current reserve of \$66,591. The proposed 2.6 percent rate increase is needed, said CCCSWA representatives, "to cover the revenue requirement and increase Orinda's reserve" to \$316,985 because revenues are coming in lower than initially projected.

This is due to several factors. As consumers recycle more, solid waste decreases. Plus, the current rate structure is also motivating local businesses to have their solid waste picked up less frequently or via smaller solid waste containers while residential users have also been switching to smaller containers, which decreases revenues available to cover fixed expenses.

For average Orindans, this means that the cost of 20 and 32-gallon containers would rise 2.9 percent - from \$27.41 and \$31.60, respectively, to \$28.20 and \$32.52. Increases for 64 and 96-gallon containers would be slightly smaller (two percent) - from \$61.28 and \$91.67 to \$62.51 and \$93.50, respectively. Commercial rates are anticipated to increase by roughly 2.6 percent.

In comparison, current monthly rates for 32-gallon containers in other cities include: Atherton (\$55), Danville (\$23.81), El Cerrito (\$38.10), Hillsborough (\$52.50), Lafayette (\$26.75), Moraga (\$24.46), Piedmont (\$50.67), and Walnut Creek (\$19.29).

"If rates are not increased as proposed and the Rate Year 9 revenue requirement is higher than the revenue and the existing reserves," according to city staff, Orinda "would be required to meet the revenue requirement from the city's general fund."

Council members Steve Glazer and Victoria Smith are serving as the city liaisons to the CCCSWA board, and are currently entertaining comments regarding the planned increase from residents. The CCCSWA board plans to provide final direction to HF&H regarding the proposed new rate structure by Jan. 18 before adopting the new rates Jan. 31.

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