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That Sinking Feeling - Orinda's Tarabrook Repair Costs May Triple

By Laurie Snyder

Heads clasped in hands, dejected Orinda City Council members received word at their Aug. 6 meeting that Orinda's recovery from the Tarabrook emergency may now end up costing three times more than the \$498,000 tab first projected by the city's engineering consultant.

The problems started last December when an antiquated 24-inch corrugated metal pipe simply couldn't take Mother Nature's rainy wrath and failed, opening up a sinkhole under Tarabrook Drive. Because that storm drain pipe is now completely blocked, the city is helping residents by pumping the upstream flow around the obstruction. The longer this situation goes on, however, the more likely another failure of some sort could occur, which could make life even harder for residents - and end up costing the city more down the road.

So, public works staff and their advisors recommended that the city replace the pipe with a new, 36-inch reinforced concrete pipe. But in order to do that, the repair crew will actually need to reach the existing pipe, currently buried at a depth of 25 feet - a storm drain depth described as "excessive" by Harrison Engineering, Inc.

Of the seven contractors who even considered tackling this nightmare, only two returned bid packages by July 18. Bay Pacific Pipelines, Inc. estimated it could complete the job for \$1,221,175 while Pfister Excavating, Inc. felt it would cost \$1,642,583. An additional 10 percent would be added for "contingency and administrative and construction management expenses."

According to Harrison Engineering personnel who reviewed the bids for the city, the most significant expense items relate to excavation safety and the jacking and boring of the larger and sturdier pipe. Two of the contractors electing not to submit bids deemed the project too risky; another determined it was "not the type (of) construction method they typically do."

The dramatic differences between initial cost estimates and the eye-popping bids are also likely a result of the limited number of contractors, in general, who are capable of performing this work, a late city bidding process, and the tight turnaround for project completion needed by the city.

Staff recommended four possible courses of action to the council: Accept the bids as is; accept the bids with changes recommended by Bay Pacific Pipelines (the lowest bidder) which could have saved the city \$100,000 but would have caused a delay while staff sought new federal and state permits to accommodate Bay Pipeline's revised drilling method; reject the current bids and reopen the bidding process again later; or redesign the project entirely and reopen the bidding.

Council members asked probing questions of staff during deliberations. Areas of concern included potential safety and financial issues, as well as the appearance of expense padding by the bidders in less critical project areas such as tree planting costs now projected as 10 percent higher than initial estimates.

Councilmember Steve Glazer recommended apologizing to Tarabrook residents before delaying the project until a more favorable bid climate could be found; however, mayor Amy Worth felt that the bid climate would likely not improve. With more people working in an improved economy, companies are now simply able to charge the city more. She also observed that the city will receive significant bang for its buck in that the replacement pipe will offer a significant improvement over the old one.

"We have no good options," said councilmember Victoria Smith. "There is nothing that makes us happy about having to spend more money than expected. Councilmember Dean Orr concurred. "I have a fair amount of fear of another winter out there."

The council authorized staff to accept the low bid and begin the Tarabrook repairs on a 3 to 1 vote (Severson excused; Glazer voting no). Construction will likely begin in September and take roughly 90 days.

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

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