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Challenging Job to Decide Fate of City Parcels

By Cathy Tyson

Shortly after Mayor Don Tatzin described how the goal of the Old Library Reuse Task Force is ultimately to make a recommendation to the Lafayette City Council and develop an action plan for how to use the structure on Moraga Road and the parking lot parcel with a former doctors' office across the street, it became very clear that doing so won't be easy.

Numerous options and constraints will have to be considered and some creative solutions, like a land swap or perhaps using proceeds from one property to enhance another, are on the table. New mayor Tatzin and former mayor Mike Anderson provided guidance, suggesting subcommittees to create a matrix quantifying impacts, costs and more to compare the various options side by side, and a public outreach committee to keep the public informed, review assessments, examine shared uses and compatibility with the downtown specific plan.

With so many moving parts involved in making a recommendation, like considering a longer term vision, finding a suitable partner for the city, defining and deciding what the highest and best, and most fiscally responsible, use actually means is overwhelming at this point. The hope is that the all-volunteer task force can narrow options and will agree on a recommendation to deliver around May of this year. It will be up to the City Council to make a final decision, and whatever is decided will still have to be reviewed like any other structure in Lafayette through the design review process and Planning Commission.

The city has a total of more than \$4 million invested in the two parcels: \$2.3 million for the aging doctors' office and parking lot on the west side of the street and \$1.97 million, a price that was agreed upon in the 1990s with Contra Costa County, for the old library building and its parking area on the east side of Moraga Road.

Volunteers bring a range of expertise to the task force - right off the bat, architect Tom Lee had valuable input along with construction and affordable housing professionals; the Chamber of Commerce, the Lafayette Community Foundation, the Methodist church that is adjacent to the west parcel, the Lafayette School District, the police, an investment banker and representatives from senior services, Parks Trails and Recreation, and the Planning Commission round out the group.

A call was made for proposals late last year and to date 12 have been received; to be fair, future proposals will still be accepted. Expected stakeholders such as the Police Department, which has an interest in the 949 Moraga Road site, the city of Lafayette, which is interested in the old library building for city offices, and the Lafayette School District have been heard from, along with unexpected others like a dance group and Futures Explored, a non-profit for developmentally disabled adults.

Traffic is already a major concern along Moraga Road; Planning and Services Director Niroop Srivatsa stated there are 20,000 vehicle trips per day on the arterial. Task force volunteers are keenly aware that part of their charge is to not make it worse.

To complicate an ultimate recommendation, both structures - the old library and the former doctors' office across the street - are not ADA-compliant and the library has suspected lead paint and confirmed asbestos in the ceiling and baseboards. Lee opined that, "a bulldozer is cheaper," for the 949 Moraga Road building, adding, "The structure is probably inappropriate for a lot of uses."

Another added wrinkle is as of the Jan. 9 meeting, the city does not have keys to the old library to allow volunteers to take a look around. "Maybe Chief Christensen can break in for us?" joked one of the participants. Tatzin explained it has been a complicated transition and they should be getting the keys from Contra Costa County in the near future.

Meetings are public and slated for 7 p.m. on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month at the Lafayette city offices, 3675 Mt. Diablo Blvd., in conference room 240.

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