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Narrowing Options on Two City-Owned Properties

By Cathy Tyson

Proceeding cautiously, the Lafayette City Council voted unanimously Sept. 22 to narrow down the options on two city-owned properties - the old library and the 949 Moraga Road parcel across the street - seeking the highest, best and most fiscally responsible uses for those properties.

After months of meetings and weighing various options, a 16-member volunteer task force recommended to the council that the old library building be used for a public purpose - either city offices or to meet needs of the Lafayette School District. The school district has a deadline of Jan. 30 to express a willingness to enter into a lease/purchase agreement for the site.

Although there were a number of proposals for the old library, these two options were selected because they were the most fiscally responsible. Because none of the nonprofit proposals offered "market rate" rent to the city, the task force concluded that it wasn't financially prudent for the city to subsidize a nonprofit tenant, especially while paying "market rate" rent for city staff offices.

It was also determined that it wasn't wise to put off a decision; the building has already been vacant for five years, hence the deadline for the school district. If the district doesn't decide to go forward, the city will direct staff to develop a timeline and budget for converting the old library into city offices at a meaningful, long term savings. In the end, owning the building would be less expensive than continuing to pay rent, according to calculations.

The future of the 949 Moraga Road parcel across the street is still a bit murky. There are concerns over a number of factors. The current parking area and aging doctors' office was purchased with \$2.31 million of parking funds collected over the years. Because of this, the task force felt that parking had to be a priority there, reported Tracy Robinson, administrative services director. In addition, the site is designated for affordable housing and counts toward the city's required fair share of affordable housing spelled out in the Housing Element.

"Public parking and a necessary affordable housing site; it's hard to figure out how to reconcile those two needs," said Council Member Brandt Andersson.

A total of 60 parking spaces are possible on the site, or potentially 100 if a parking structure is erected. The site could also be used for affordable housing - Eden Housing had a proposal to use the property for low income housing, but it would be contingent upon the city donating the land, said Robinson, which is an issue since it was purchased with parking funds. Council members were intrigued with the potential to accommodate both affordable housing and parking.

A boutique hotel was considered, but did not receive unanimous support from task force members who were looking for a broad public benefit. This option could generate revenue for the city, but would likely cause congestion on the already clogged Moraga Road. A land swap with the Methodist church was also considered, but the church was not in a position to make a firm decision and further analysis is needed.

For now, the bottom line for the 949 Moraga Road property is to have city staff look at one or more options: parking, affordable housing, or a hotel or other private development.

"I think the task force did a great job," said Council Member Mike Anderson, "it was a very thorough process - 949 (Moraga Road) is kind of an open question; it's going to take some creative thinking."

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