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Published February 25th, 2015

Orinda City Council Approves Mid-Year Budget Corrections

By Laurie Snyder



The City of Orinda's General Fund Operating Budget is a small one - just \$13,312,542. This graphic illustrates what happens with each Orinda property tax dollar. Image provided

Advocates for Lawful Environmental Review Today (ALERT), to create an EIR for the fifth cycle Housing Element update. (See "Orinda Settles Housing Element Lawsuit" in the Lamorinda Weekly's online archives: www.lamorindaweekly.com.)

PMC representative Jennifer Gastelum added that, based on its experience with other cities' housing elements and EIRs, PMC anticipated it would need to address just 30 public comment letters. Orinda received 63 - including one anonymous, 72-page letter demanding the city respond to 330 separate points. That letter alone "was several days' worth of work," and "basically blew everything out of the water," she said. Council tabled PMC's request, pending receipt of additional documentation, and will reconsider it March 3.

During its annual mid-fiscal year budget review Feb. 3, council learned that city administrative expenses rose above projections by \$290,000: \$50,000 in added costs for the city attorney's work on the Housing Element update and "an unusually high level of litigation" - active and threatened - and the resulting "negotiation, implementation or modification of multiple settlement agreements;" \$79,000 in Public Works costs for road and street sweeper repairs; \$15,000 for 2015 election costs; and \$46,000 to fix Pine Grove Park field damage, purchase Parks and Recreation supplies and meet the transportation and facilities demands of campers flocking to Orinda's programs. Plus, planning staff needed \$100,000 to cover rising development applications and study alternatives to the current county delivery of building department services.

That latter \$100,000 will likely be a wash due to a corresponding \$100,000 revenue boost from added development activity, as will Parks' outlays with added spring and summer class revenues. But the big news was the county's projection that an estimated \$200,000 in additional property tax revenue is headed to Orinda.

Then, at its Feb. 17 meeting, council considered staff requests to replace Public Works' 1997 bobcat skid-steer loader and two "undercover" police cars (non-black and whites with concealed emergency lights). All three are near or past the end of their useful lives. The replacement SUVs could also make it easier for police to navigate Orinda's hilly terrain.

Orinda's conservative fiscal management is working, according to a Feb. 3 staff report to the Orinda City Council. The city's operating budget remains in the black despite the Manzanita Bridge replacement, the revenue-sapping Tarabrook sinkhole emergency and other recent big-ticket outlays. Before they heard the news that both expenses and revenues are up, though, council members entertained a request by Pacific Municipal Consultants for roughly \$35,000 more to cover unexpected work on the city's Housing Element update and its related Environmental Impact Report (EIR).

In response to probing questions by all five council members regarding the disparity between PMC's initial and revised workload estimates, planning director Emmanuel Ursu explained that Orinda held more public meetings and produced more drafts of the element than expected due to the intense public debate over the matter. In addition, PMC's projections were made before the city agreed, as part of its settlement with

Council also debated whether to use \$453,000 of the roughly \$800,000 available from the East Bay Regional Park District's Measure WW parcel tax in order to increase the allocation for Orinda Grove Park improvements. City staff made the request to compensate for inflation caused by construction delays plus enhancements to pedestrian lighting, drainage and irrigation systems, site furnishings and tot lot surfacing requested by the city after its 2008 agreement with the developer, Pulte Homes, was signed. Measure WW funds are restricted to parkland acquisition or park and recreation-related capital project development, and must be used by December 2018. According to the staff report, Pulte will cover 60 percent of the project's total cost.

On Feb. 3, council accepted the staff and second quarter financial reports, and amended the Fiscal Year 2014-15 budget. On Feb. 17, council increased the Oak Grove allocation and approved, via consent calendar, replacement of the bobcat with a new loader with backhoe and bucket accessories at a cost not to exceed \$55,000 plus two Ford Edge police vehicles at a total cost not to exceed \$60,000. All three will be paid for from funds already budgeted under the city's Vehicle Replacement Fund. Council also increased the Oak Grove allocation.

Horizon events which could further siphon city dollars include a resident request that the city purchase security cameras for public right-of-way installation at \$750 each, partial transfer of unassigned general fund monies to slope emergency stabilization and a potential parking study.

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