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Council Mulls Road Funding Options and Directs Voter Poll

By Victor Ryerson

Faced with the imminent need to move Orinda's road repairs and maintenance forward to completion in a timely manner, the City Council has taken the next steps toward achieving that goal by reviewing five funding options and authorizing a public opinion poll to identify the best option to place before voters. There is no escaping the fact that finishing the work will require an increase in taxes, and the council is trying to determine how residents are most inclined to take their medicine. The issue of what standard to achieve was settled by the council Nov. 17, when it considered road repair alternatives proposed by the Citizens Infrastructure Oversight Committee. Choosing the alternative that would require all roads in Orinda to meet a minimum Pavement Condition Index (PCI) standard of 50, insuring good roads for the entire community, the council then referred the matter to the Finance Advisory Committee (FAC) to identify funding options to accomplish that goal. Although it was not anticipated that the FAC would be able to report back to the council before January, it did so at the Dec. 15 meeting.

The FAC identified five potential funding sources, as well as the estimated tax rates and the pros and cons associated with each. Closely associated with the choice is the decision whether to accelerate the funding by issuing a bond, or to adopt a pay-as-you-go approach with tax revenues. The possible sources of new funding identified by the FAC include sales tax, parcel tax, ad valorem tax, real estate transfer tax, and utility tax. A combination of these could be used, but the voter approval requirement varies among them, making the decision complicated. One approach, enacting a real estate transfer tax, would require Orinda to become a charter city.

Repeating a comment made by another FAC member, Chairman Bob Thompson told the council that the various options "all gore someone's ox, and the oxen are different for different people." He emphasized the need for significant public outreach and discussion, so that voters will understand the need for a tax and the attendant consequences. FAC member Bob Burt fleshed out the pros and cons of each for the council, and answered the council members' questions.

Discussion of the issue segued into the matter of public outreach when the council authorized city staff to contract with a public opinion polling firm to conduct a poll regarding infrastructure funding options, as well as satisfaction with city services generally. Because tight election deadlines must be met, in order to avoid delaying the road repairs, the survey questions will be presented to the council at its Jan. 12 meeting. The survey results are expected in February.

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