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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.

Clearance a Necessity on Lamorinda Roads

... continued from page A1



Photo courtesy Moraga-Orinda Fire District

She noted that the vegetation canopy over the roadway caused problems for evacuation at the Valley Fire. Plus the fact that the fire burned utility poles, leaving no cell coverage, no Internet access, and people couldn't receive the message to evacuate. Potential for such a disaster exists in the private enclaves of Lamorinda.

The unkempt vegetation also can damage the district apparatus. "But it's not about our equipment," said Leonard. "The engines will get there, regardless of the challenge, even if it means damaging the equipment. It's the delay in response."

Fire inspectors Kristian Balfour and Trent Willis drove a Ford F-250 along a narrow Orinda private road,

and pointed out a recent accident scene. An overhanging branch from a large tree impeded an MOFD engine, and as the engine tried to avoid trash cans on the side of the road, it wrecked into the tree.

"It's not about us trying to be difficult," said Willis, as he crept through North Road in Orinda, another spot the utility vehicle - let alone a fire engine - had trouble navigating. He repeated Leonard's words nearly verbatim, pounding home a consistent message. "The firefighters will risk injury, they'll rip the lights off the engine to get through, they'll do whatever they have to do to get there," he said. "It's all about the delay."

City manager Janet Keeter confirmed that Orinda has no jurisdiction over maintenance of private roads. Leonard said she hopes the maintenance efforts will be governed by common sense.

"We'd like to see this work completed by the beginning of the fire season, by early next spring," said Leonard. "In the winter, you don't have to worry about sparks causing fires, or worry about the low humidity. Now is the time to do it."

She fears that not doing it could bring dire consequences.

"The Valley Fire burned at six miles an hour. A lot of people can't run that fast," said Leonard. "If we don't act, we'll be in the same situation."

Happy New Year! It's a new year and we are READY FOR TAKEOFF! Wishing you all the best in 2016 ... and beyond!

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