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Survey Results Create Dilemma for Council

By Victor Ryerson

An evenly split Orinda City Council struggled with the question of whether to approach voters with a proposal to fund just another piece of the city's ongoing Road Maintenance and Improvement Project, or shoot for the moon and seek the voter support necessary to cover the entire \$47 million cost to complete the job.

Working against a tight deadline to put the matter before voters on the June 16 ballot, the four council members struggled to reach a consensus at their Feb. 2 meeting. All agreed that the repair job must be done, but not necessarily how to fund it, because the stakes are so high: A wrong call could substantially delay the needed work as it has in the past if the voters turn it down, leaving roads crumbling and Orinda residents fuming.

In a presentation of results of the public opinion poll recently commissioned by the council, David Metz, president of survey firm FM3, reported that voters are generally happy with city services and satisfied with the work of the council, but somewhat skeptical about the job the city has done spending tax dollars, an obvious concern for a city that is on the cusp of spending an awful lot of them.

Voters are most dissatisfied with road maintenance, but they worry about the price tag for accomplishing the full repair job. Given the choice between doing some or all of it, nearly half of the 346 registered voters contacted by telephone between Jan. 16 and 24 of this year prefer a measure that would solve all of the city's \$47 million in road repair needs - but any such measure would require approval by a supermajority of two-thirds of the voters in order to succeed.

The poll focused on the two funding methods previously identified by the council as the most desirable, a general obligation bond and a parcel tax. Of these two options, voters more consistently supported the bond approach by a slight margin, but the "no" responses were consistently far higher - 28 versus 16 percent - for the parcel tax. However, this still resulted in a 31 percent "swing" category for the bond option, and half of that group would need to be persuaded to vote "yes" in order to reach the necessary supermajority for approval.

The survey concludes that although a total of 75 percent of Orinda voters are willing to pay something additional to fix the worst streets, repair potholes, and address safety issues (especially for children), among other street maintenance priorities, there is uncertainty about whether enough support can be mustered to pay for it all at once. Experience in the past has demonstrated that an incremental approach is probably more palatable, but this piecemeal option clearly caused council members Dean Orr and Darlene Gee considerable discomfort as they discussed the survey results. In short, they expressed a desire to take the greater risk of failure and approach the voters with a proposal to fund the repairs fully and, hopefully, get it over with. Mayor Victoria Smith and Vice Mayor Eve Phillips were not so sure this would be a good idea.

On the basis of the survey results, FM3's Metz recommended that the city approach the voters with a proposal for a general obligation bond in an amount less than the full \$47 million, "maybe in the range of \$20 million."

The council readily accepted the first recommendation, but hesitated at the second, setting the stage for a possible stalemate at this critical moment. To the rescue came the former mayor, now state Sen. Steve Glazer, who had arrived too late to participate in the public hearing, but was granted leave to speak on the issue.

Having been chastened by the results of earlier efforts to approach voters to pay the full tab during his administration, he expressed the opinion that "we do have a path forward in the \$20 to \$25 million range." His remarks apparently broke the deadlock, and in short order city staff was instructed to bring back a \$25 million general obligation bond proposal for the council to consider on Feb. 16.

Putting the issue on the upcoming ballot promises to be a cliffhanger, but the prospect of achieving a final resolution of Orinda's vexing road repair problem appears to be at hand. Or not.

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