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Poll to Measure Support of Sales Tax Increase

By Cathy Tyson

With a unanimous vote, the Lafayette City Council decided to fund a poll to investigate if residents are truly supportive of an additional 1 percent sales tax measure, under consideration for the Nov. 8 ballot, which if approved, would boost the city sales tax to 9.75 percent.

The independent all-volunteer Sales Tax Revenue Study Committee has done extensive research on current and projected city finances along with priorities gleaned from the recent Community Conversation. They recommend a 1 percent general sales tax, which sunsets in 30 years. The group also analyzed potential polling firms and recommended Godbe Research to conduct a voter attitude survey regarding a potential sales tax measure, at a maximum cost of \$26,250.

"Absent additional revenue, the city will be very limited in its ability to implement the projects already identified in the Downtown Specific Plan, transportation studies, various master plans and the Community Conversations," the group concluded.

At the Feb. 8 council meeting, Mayor Mark Mitchell acknowledged that Lafayette was founded as a low tax, low service city roughly 50 years ago, but things may have changed over five decades and ultimately it is the "public's choice."

Council Member Don Tatzin agreed: "Polling will help tell us if there is interest." The poll will ask a sampling of residents if they support an additional 1 percent sales tax that would run for 30 years. There is a cost associated with placing a measure on the November ballot, according to City Manager Steven Falk; that cost depends on how many other items are on the ballot. "The greater the number, the lower the cost," said Falk, who expects it to fall at the lower end of a \$20,000 to \$120,000 range. Council members wanted to gauge support of the measure before committing to additional election costs.

Being clear about the intent of the revenue was a major concern for Council Member Traci Reilly, who encouraged a narrowed list of projects that the tax revenue could be used for, to give voters a clear picture. Possible projects include purchasing open space, increasing crime surveillance cameras and police, adding a parking garage, revitalizing the Park Theater, and focusing on downtown events and road repairs.

In the past, the city has attempted to pass special taxes, and while over half the voters voted yes on the measures, none of them was able to reach the two-thirds threshold necessary to pass. If the city council chooses after the poll results are in to place the measure on the ballot, this time it would be for a general tax that requires a simple majority to pass: 50 percent of the vote plus one. If approved, Lafayette's 1 percent additional sales tax would bring the rate up to 9.75 percent, in the ballpark of neighboring Lamorinda municipalities. Moraga approved a 1 percent sales tax increase in 2012, Measure K, which will run for 20 years to pay for road and storm drain repair. Measure K passed with 70 percent approval and brought Moraga's sales tax rate to 9.25 percent. Orinda voters approved Measure L in 2012 - a half-cent sales tax that brings their rate up to 9 percent. The tax will automatically terminate in 10 years.

While council members are supportive of the poll, clearly one member of the audience was not. Longtime resident Joan Bruzzone said, "It was painful for me to listen to anybody wanting to spend \$26,000 for a poll to encourage us to spend more money on things we really don't need." She encouraged the council to either vote yes or no, "without spending money, without having a company convince us we need this increase."

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