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Town Hopes to Start Culvert Repair by mid-August

By Sophie Braccini

Repair of the Moraga sinkhole will depend on the California Department of Transportation's speedy approval of the town's plans and permits of the repair of the Laguna Creek culvert.

The approval process leading to the repair of the sinkhole at the crossing the Rheem Boulevard and Moraga Road is moving forward satisfactorily, according to Moraga Public Works Director Edric Kwan.

The culvert could be replaced by mid-October, but the road repair is likely to be delayed until 2017. Kwan confirmed at the July 13 town council meeting that the total \$545,000 the town spent when the emergency occurred last March would be completely reimbursed by the Federal Highway Administration. The second phase or permanent restoration of the sinkhole will require the town to upfront the cost and contribute 11.47 percent of the final expense. The director added that some expenses, such as attorney's fees, might not qualify for reimbursement.

The process is managed by Caltrans. The local agency has signed a Joint Stewardship and Oversight Agreement with the FHWA to manage federal aid. Its initial decision had been to deny the town's application, but the appeal was granted on July 1.

During the council meeting, vice mayor Dave Trotter noted that Mayor Mike Metcalf used the relationship he had formed working on transportation issues for the town with Randi Iwazaki, executive director of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority, to help formulate the town's appeal.

Kwan said that one added element to winning the appeal had been convincing the agency that the town was serious about finding funding to tackle the larger issue of the storm drain system.

"They are now convinced that we are on the right track to get a funding source to get the storm drain system fixed and not have a similar problem happen again," Kwan said.

For information, the storm drain master plan that was received by the council last year had identified culverts as the weakest links of the system; the culvert that failed had been designated as urgently needing repairs. The plan lists \$8.9 million of high priority work and a total of \$26 million of unfunded delayed maintenance. (See the August 25, 2015 article: www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0913/Creek-Culverts-The-Weakest-Links-of-the-Moraga-Storm-Drain-System.html.)

Kwan's objective is still to finish the replacement of the culvert that channels Laguna Creek before Oct. 15, the date that traditionally marks the beginning of the rainy season. He believes this is critical to avoid more damage, including potential upstream flooding and more property damage.

Kwan estimates the replacement of the pipe to take 30 to 35 working days, meaning that the work should start mid- to late-August.

Before work starts the repair contract has to be awarded to a contractor, following a bid process of three weeks, in order to follow the proper protocol. Kwan therefore said at the July 13 meeting that all the required reviews and approvals from Caltrans would need to be secured by July 25. On July 25 Kwan reported that CalTrans had not completed the necessary approvals and had not given his department an approval date.

The Director had prepared a contingency plan if permits could not be secured on time and the contractor will plug the holes and fill the gaps or the existing damaged metal culvert. Kwan confirmed that temporary repairs should withstand this rainy season and that the rest of the work, replacing the pipe and repairing the road will be done next year. Kwan continues to explore all possible options in case approvals are received in the next days.

Senior engineer Laurie Sugang added that the utilities of the different agencies that are located in the hole are being protected in place during construction. The East Bay Municipal Utilities District will repair its own pipe as the town repairs the culvert. Pacific Gas & Electric has diverted the broken gas line from the hole; it will also tie in the line after the town repairs the culvert. Other utilities such as Central San will let the town repair its utilities and will inspect the finished work.

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