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Town of Moraga mulls tax for storm drain repair

By Sophie Braccini

Moraga has started preliminary work to propose a new tax of some form to fund its storm drain network repair and maintenance.

The gaping hole in the middle of town is the perfect catalyst for staff and council to garner sufficient public support. One set of figures says it all according to Public Works Director Edric Kwan: Fixing the sinkhole before it failed would have cost $1.7 million to the town, repairing it will total $3.4 million. This time federal money will bail Moraga out of the hole, but the funding was first denied in the face of the town's lack of maintenance, and would not probably be extended again if the town does not take the bull by the horns and fix its drains.

Storm drains have been extensively studied by the public works department and in the report that was presented in 2015. The total cost for repairing the high priority spots totals over $9 million; the medium priority is $11 million, and the low priority is over $6 million for a total close to $27 million to fully fix storm drains.

To these infrastructure expenditures Moraga needs to add a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit to control the water quality that will ultimately be discharged in its water drinking system. Staff estimates that another $155,000 per year is required to be compliant with its NPDES permit.

Addressing the audit and finance committee on April 10, Kwan explained that there would be different options to ask residents to fund part or all of the needed work.

Proposition 218, The Right to Vote on Taxes Act, allows cities to charge property owners a fee to finance property-related services, such as storm drains, subject to voter approval. The fee isn't the same for each property. For example a small lot with few nonpermeable surfaces would be charged less than a large property with a lot of concrete, because it would impact the storm drain system differently. Very large owners such as the school district would have more than one vote on the tax, while renters do not vote. This process requires a 50 percent majority to be approved.

Other options, including a special tax and a general obligation bond, require a two-thirds majority of voters for approval. In Moraga where the percentage of homeowner occupied houses is over 80 percent, the two groups voting on the tax, residents and homeowers, are not very different.

Staff, commissions and committees have a long road in front of them, probably a year or more of study and public outreach to inform and convince the residents that this new tax is a necessity. The town will also have to gauge public support and decide the level of taxing that will be asked.

Funding all the needs would require an annual fee of about $312 per parcel. SCI Consulting Group that is consulting with Moraga on this topic warns that a $312 levy would be high. Vice mayor Roger Wykle, who sits on the audit and finance committee, said that if $312 was what is needed to do things right, then it should be the amount asked to property owners.

SCI ultimately weighed in favor of the vice mayor adding, that recent trends show that when residents are presented with real hard facts and precise action plans, rather than vague marketing phrases, they respond positively to taxing.

The town council will discuss this topic shortly and an information campaign will start in the wake of the council's approval of the process. A measure is envisioned to be on the ballot in mid-2018.

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