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Moraga revenue measure survey causes some confusion

By Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Town Council will review the results of a survey Nov. 8 that was ordered to gauge the community's support for new taxes. The results are in and indicate that without additional information, a majority of residents are willing to tax themselves to maintain the storm drains, but are less likely to do so to address other financial needs of the town.

Other questions remain unanswered: How much is really needed from residents to compensate the unfunded infrastructure maintenance (roads and storm drains)? What other unmet financial needs does the town have besides its infrastructure? Will the council feel it can garner the community's support to address some or all of these needs?

It is not really a question of "if," but of "what" and "how much." The results of the survey that the town conducted a few weeks ago show that a majority of residents would support a storm drain fee per parcel in the \$144 a year range, an amount that is grossly insufficient to address the storm drain issue in its entirety, and that would do nothing to improve all of the other unfunded needs of the town.

Seven months ago, SCI Consulting Group made a presentation to the town's leadership during a storm drain plan workshop and estimated the per parcel taxation needed to address the problem at \$312 a year; \$144 per parcel would cover the high priority projects and legally mandated expenses, but not the medium priority ones that are the largest category with a funding need of \$11.4 million. There were talks at the meeting of what amount would be supported by the community. Vice Mayor Roger Wykle said that Moraga residents were intelligent people who could support a full cost measure, if provided with a complete and reliable picture of what exists, as well as the plan for moving forward. He noted that trust between the residents and their government was key to ensure success on a ballot.

The storm drain tax would not begin to address the town's unfunded asset replacement, or improve the town's reserves. At the end of 2014, a subgroup of Moraga's Audit and Finance Committee presented the results of its study of the town's asset replacement plan. The subgroup calculated that the town should set aside more than \$600,000 a year to replace its assets - not including the roads, drains and building frames. Since then the asset replacement fund has been completely depleted and no savings have been made. At the mid-year budget revision meeting, Administrative Director Amy Cunningham noted that the total unfunded needs for this budget cycle equaled approximately \$517,000. The director added that Moraga is not the only community that has not sufficiently saved for asset replacement and infrastructure maintenance; it is a problem that plagues the entire country.

The survey that will be discussed on Nov. 8 was conducted by Godbe Research and was facilitated through different types of media: emails, land lines and cell phones. Cunningham explains that there were different iterations of the survey, some testing negative views of the town, some testing positive views, and that it had been constructed by Godbe using surveying best practices that she says are based on scientific methods.

Cunningham explained that the survey combined two types of questions: Would residents support a utility users tax, or would they support a parcel fee for storm drains? She said that the double set of questions could have made the survey somewhat confusing, but that the town combined it in order to save money. The fee could be put on a March mail-in ballot requiring only a 50 percent majority. The funds garnered would be restricted to storm drains only and would not improve the state of the town's reserves. The UUT would have to be put on a regular ballot, such as in the November 2018 election. The survey results indicated that residents would not support this option, and Cunningham indicated that for this reason staff would not recommend this option at this time.

One troubling fact that emerged from the survey was that 43 percent of the population believes that the town is "not going in the right direction," twice as many people responding this way over last year, when a majority trusted the town. The question was vague, however, and did not provide an explanation about what was wrong and what should be changed.

The results of the survey will be presented to the town council on Nov. 8, and can be found online at <http://www.moraga.ca.us/StormDrainProject>. It is not certain that the council will make any type of decision on that day. As usual, the meeting is public and residents are encouraged to participate. The meeting can also be seen live online at [//livestream.com/moraga](http://livestream.com/moraga).

Facts about UUTs and a storm drain fee

User utility taxes are taxes that a city or county can impose on utility bills such as electricity, gas, water, sewer, telephone (including cell phones), sanitation and cable television. In California the rate varies from a low of 1 percent to a high of 11 percent. A UUT is either a general tax placed on a regular ballot that requires a simple majority vote, or a special tax restricted to the purpose stated in the measure; it can then be proposed at any election and needs a 2/3 majority. About half of the residents of California pay a UUT. The survey proposed a UUT that would generate \$1.9 million annually to the town, an increase of about 20 percent of its current budget, equating to approximately \$316 per household per year. The revenue could be used for other purposes than storm drains. Because utility bills can vary greatly from residence to residence, however, the estimated tax burden for one household could be sizably different from another.

The storm drain fee would not be the same for different properties; it would vary depending on how much that property impacts the storm drain system. It would be calculated contingent upon the amount of

impervious surface around houses or commercial properties. Size of a property and aerial pictures can be used to determine the fee. If someone replaces a concrete driveway with permeable pavers, that person could appeal for a lower fee. Residents part of an HOA who already pay a fee for the private drainage in the HOA would pay a lower fee.

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