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Town officials search for alternate sources of storm drain funding

By *Sophie Braccini*

During its May 23 meeting the Moraga Town Council and staff expressed their disappointment over the results of the storm drain fee measure that was brought for a vote by property owners in April/May. The measure failed by 137 votes. Nearly 60 percent of property owners returned their ballots; 48 percent voted yes, and 52 percent no.

Each council member drew somewhat different conclusions from the measure's failure, but all agreed that the coming budget should take the results into account and that they should find new ways to fund at least some of the maintenance and the legal mandate pertaining to the storm drain system. It is likely that addressing the millions of dollars in delayed maintenance will have to wait.

Edric Kwan, Moraga's public works director who has worked for years on a storm drain master plan and was an enthusiast proponent of finding a way to finance the old and at-risk storm drain system, noted that taking care of the town's infrastructure remained a very high priority item and that he and his team would look at alternatives to protect the town from future infrastructure failure.

When the fee was proposed, Kwan explained that the money would be allocated to three categories: a maintenance budget to prolong the life of the storm drains that are aging but are not too damaged; a second portion to finance the state unfunded mandate to eliminate all pollution in the storm drain system; and, most importantly, money to address the high-priority storm drain areas that were identified most in need of repair three years ago using televised exploration and ground inspection. Without a fee in place, the town has to find the money to at least maintain the existing network and fulfill its clean water mandate.

Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg asked the council if it would consider putting a different funding measure on the November ballot. None of the four present council members thought it was a good idea. All however agreed to direct the manager, as her team works on the 2018-19 budget, to identify ways to provide funds for the storm drains.

Vice Mayor Teresa Onoda and council members Jeanette Fritzky and Kymberleigh Korpus asked that staff focus from now on only on projects that are essential to the functioning of the town. Mayor David Trotter asked that if more property tax revenue is collected, a large portion be designated for infrastructure. Some of the council members acknowledged that they collectively bore some responsibility for the results. Fritzky and Onoda said that faced by a series of emergencies the management of the town had been more reactive than proactive and that moving forward it needed to be more strategic. Korpus noted that Battenberg was forward thinking and recommended that she would be tasked with developing a strategic plan for the town.

The mayor floated the idea of a two-year plan to advocate for a more documented strategy for the storm drain system. Korpus and Onoda agreed that the town still has a backlog of storm drain repair that would cost the town millions of dollars and that by 2020 a new proposal could come to a ballot.

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