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Orinda garbage fees rise by 12%, no relief for private road residents

By Sora O'Doherty

Garbage collections fees will rise by 12% for Orinda customers for the period March 1, 2020 to Feb. 28, 2021. With this increase, Orinda will have the highest garbage fees in Contra Costa County, according to city manager Steve Salomon. The increase comprises 4% for operating costs of Republic, 1% for long-term maintenance of Big Belly smart containers, and 7% for vehicle impact fees, imposed to offset the damage done by heavy garbage trucks to public roads. Although the fees are imposed on all customers, the funds will only be expended on public roads, leading to protests from residents of private roads, who seek either to be included in the repair work or to be exempted from the fee.

Two longtime private road advocates submitted their views on the matter: Steve Cohn in an email sent to the city council prior to the meeting and Melissa Roeder, who spoke at the meeting. Cohn told council members, "When the fee was small, the inequality could be ignored." But, he continued, "it is no longer small and it looks like it is growing by leaps and bounds." Roeder said that the increase taxes everyone, but only benefits four-fifths of the city. She suggested that either private road residents should not be forced to pay the vehicle impact fees, or their streets should also receive the benefits of the fees.

Council Member Dennis Fay did not object to the portion of the increase that is due to the increased cost of doing business, but did object to the portion of the increase (about 7 percentage points of the 12% increase) that is related to the road impact fee, because he did not agree with the method used to calculate the amount of funds the city is using for roads. He ultimately voted against the increase. Council Member Inga Miller offered two suggestions: Private road residents may, she said, bring their refuse containers to public roads for collection. She said that she had checked this with Republic Services, who agreed that it would be allowed. There were no details offered on how exactly that would work. In addition, Miller pointed out that the garbage vehicles caused damage while traveling over public roads to reach the private roads. Mayor Darlene Gee noted that the increases won't be popular, but agreed with other council members that service under Republic Services is much better than in the past. The portion for the popular Big Belly containers is intended to offset the fact that recycling no longer provides income to the city, following dramatic changes in the industry. The fee increase passed by a 4-1 vote.

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