



Published May 27th, 2020

Orinda Council ponders tax increase, disaster-response coordinator position

By Sora O'Doherty

As Orinda tries to gauge the appetite of residents for increased sales taxes, one idea that is gaining ground is the addition of a permanent employee to coordinate the city's response in the event of a disaster. At the May 19 city council meeting, such a proposal was put forth by Orinda Police Chief David Cook, who talked about staffing for all-hazard planning and disaster evacuation planning.

Cook said he has been working closely with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and was very impressed. However, in light of emergency programs at the national and state level, local plans need to be continually reviewed, he said. In addition, there is a need for a person to coordinate emergency planning and community outreach.

Council Member Inga Miller talked about the tragedy caused during the Oakland Hills fire by cars parked on small, windy roads, and wondered if part of the evacuation planning would include no parking signage in times of high fire danger. Cook agreed that such signage was definitely a possibility, and said that the position suggested would be a full-time job with significant duties including working with community groups to make sure they understand disaster plans, such as the need to keep the route to Sleepy Hollow School free for emergency vehicles in the event of a wild fire.

City Manager Steve Salomon told the council that staff has talked about this being a city employee. "While wild fire is the predominant threat," he said, the city also has a history of landslides, earthquakes, and other disasters. "There is," he said, "a variety of things the community could be better prepared for."

Director of Public Works and Assistant City Manager Larry Theis presented the staff report on a possible ballot measure in November to either extend the current half-cent sales tax, set to sunset at the end of 2022, or to extend it and raise it by up to another half-cent. Although the city had commissioned a poll of voter attitudes, it was conducted prior to the impact of the novel coronavirus that struck the state, resulting in shelter-in-place orders being implemented in early March. The council has until around August to decide if they wish to have an Orinda sales tax ballot measure, and if so, what the specifics might be. One of the factors motivating the council is that should such a measure be placed on the November ballot, but fail to pass, the council would have another opportunity in 2022.

Theis also emphasized the need for additional funding to complete Orinda's extensive road renovation project. Although the residential roads have been largely completed, the city still has to deal with its arterials and collectors, as well as its storm drains. The subject of road improvements has continually been brought before the city council, and the work could easily absorb all of the increased revenue from an extension of the half-cent sales tax or even a proposed increase. Theis emphasized that the more money spent on the roads early, the lower the costs will be later. The issue of whether or not the city should contribute in some manner to the upkeep of private roads has been controversial. Although there were no speakers on the subject participating in the meeting, there was a large number of written submissions, including a long discussion by private roads proponent Steve Cohn, who stated that he believes "the community has voiced a strong opinion in favor of publicly funding roads and storm drains built on private property." The council received emails supportive of the private roads from a further two dozen residents, the Bear Ridge HOA Board of Directors and a petition signed by 735 residents of Orinda.

Other written submissions were from residents, including those who live in Orinda's Firewise communities, emphasizing the need for much greater efforts to prevent future wild fire events from affecting Orinda. The council authorized funding for more polls, more detailed than tracking polls. The matter will return to the council, possibly more than once prior to a decision on what tax measures, if any, should be placed on the November ballot.

A joint fire prevention committee between MOFD and Orinda and Moraga council members and others was also announced at the meeting (see story Page A10).

All the materials submitted to the city council are available on the city's website:
<https://cityforinda.app.box.com/v/citycouncilmeetings/file/667174071671>

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