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Orinda soft-pedals private roads, eyes 1% general sales tax

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda city council members seemed to unanimously support a staff proposal to put a 1% sales tax measure on the November ballot. The tax, which would last for 20 years, would be a general tax, giving the council discretion on how to appropriate the funds. The council had received a barrage of communications from residents of private roads, however, who oppose any sales tax that does not provide for the maintenance of private roads. Of the 58 written comments received on the proposed sales tax, 57 strongly opposed the tax, suggesting instead a five-year parcel tax of \$150 per parcel to address fire safety issues. Nick Warranoff wrote to support the 1% sales tax, but objected to the proposed emergency operations center and the addition of an employee to coordinate emergency response.

Steve Cohn, who has long been a proponent of the private roads residents, submitted lengthy written comments. His first point was acted upon by the council, on the motion

of Vice Mayor Amy Worth. In response to his comments, the council amended the minutes from the last two meetings to include reference to written comments submitted, and a link to those public written comments. A link to public comments will also be included in future minutes. Written comments are maintained by the city clerk as part of the public record.

Cohn has continually made the point that it is not equitable that some 20% of Orinda residents pay all the same taxes as other residents, but are excluded from the street repair and maintenance by the city because their streets are deemed private. Private roads residents continue to point out that their streets resemble many other residential streets in Orinda that are included in the public street maintenance program.

In a nod to both the residents of private roads and those concerned about high fire danger, the council supported the staff recommendation that the tax be devoted to fire mitigation for the first five years, and that the effort would not exclude private road residents. It was also suggested that, as the new tax will provide discretionary funds, the possibility that the city might do something in regards to private roads continues to exist, although there is no specific proposal under consideration at the present time. Addressing the issue of private roads, Mayor Darlene Gee said, "On a personal level I have continued to be supportive to listening to the private road issues. This has still has not resulted in any actionable item that has resolved, but," she said, "a number of us are con-

tinuing to look at what might be possible in that arena."

Gee also addressed the possibility of a parcel tax instead of a sales tax. "Parcel taxes have," she noted, "historically polled very poorly in Orinda and have taken an incredible downward turn in California." She pointed out that in the recent March elections across the state, 27 non-school parcel taxes were on the ballot, but only six passed. Further, she said, of the 21 that failed, eight were for fire districts.

Also on the June 30 agenda was a staff report regarding recommendations from the Firewise Council, currently chaired by Melanie Light. MOFD Fire Chief Dave Winacker attended the Zoom meeting to talk about fire safety and the city's proposed plans. The first priority of the city is to establish a new Emergency Planning and Wildfire Fuel Reduction Program and hire a full-time staff person to work with the Oversight Committee to develop and implement a fire fuel reduction program on city property and the public right of way. This administrator would also be charged with designing and coordinating community outreach programs for a variety of city-wide emergency response and crime prevention/neighborhood watch plans, and working with inter-agency teams to coordinate, document, and implement response planning to natural and man-made disasters in the city. The administration would also maintain and upgrade training, equipment, and procedures for the City Emergency Operations Center and other duties to assist in emergency planning and implementation.

The sales tax would also provide funding for an aggressive initial fire fuel reduction program to bring city owned property into compliance with current and new MOFD fire code, initiate long-term landscape maintenance and tree service contracts to maintain all vegetation on city-owned properties and within the public road right of way to MOFD fire code requirements and develop educational handouts for the residents to prepare for future natural disasters.

Although the proposed sales tax is also needed to maintain residential roads, which have been renovated under the previous sales tax measure, set to expire next year, the council considered that the use of the new sales tax revenue for road maintenance can be deferred for at least five to 10 years. This would allow the tax to be used for the pressing issues of fire prevention and repairing high priority public storm drains and culverts. In addition, the city could use some \$90,000 to hire an emergency response administrator. Warranoff, in his comments, suggested that the drains alone could consume all of the revenue raised by the sales tax.

City Manager Steve Salomon told the council that staff will work with FM3 to do tracking polling and will present the results to the council on July 21. He suggested that the council at that meeting finalize the concept and decide whether they want to move forward. If so, on July 28 staff can present the various material in final form. The council deadline for approval of a measure for the November ballot is Aug. 4.

Senior planner Mayank Patel moves on

By Sora O'Doherty

Mayor Darlene Gee announced at the June 16 city council meeting that Orinda is losing senior planner Mayank Patel, who has been the lead planner on the downtown precise plan. "We are really going to miss him," Gee said. "He has gotten a lot of good reviews and has fans here in Orinda." The mayor publicly thanked him and wished him all the best, recalling that among his other talents, he helped the city set up Zoom as the pandemic forced all meetings to suddenly become virtual. "We will always have a warm spot for you and look forward to hearing great things about you in the future," Gee told Patel.

While Patel said Orinda will always have a special place in his heart, when an opportunity to work closer to home arose, Patel said that COVID being around made his choice clear. He and his wife, an attorney, live in Fremont with their two little boys. Patel's new job, although a step down, working for the city of Newark, is just two miles from his home. Patel will start in Newark as an associate planner.

Patel said he was giving his all to the Orinda downtown precise plan, but wasn't being good about fulfilling his responsibilities as a father and husband. "It is only right," he says, "that I step away and allow the right amount of resources to be devoted to the community and the organization." The downtown precise plan will continue, although it

has not yet been determined who will lead the project in Patel's absence.

Patel started with Orinda at the end of August, 2015. His last day was June 23. Patel brought to the job experience in the private sector that made him invaluable to Orinda. He used his knowledge of GIS (geographic information systems) to help the public works department, wore different hats and helped different departments, including helping with the new website, and the transition between the old and the new. "I've learned a lot," Patel said, "and because it is a small agency, I was able to."

Patel was honored with a proclamation read by the planning commission chair Brandyn Iverson at the joint meeting of the planning commission and the downtown development subcommittee on June 23. He was recognized for his four years and nine months as an employee, starting as an assistant planner and leaving as a senior planner. He was said to be so tech savvy that his coworkers preferred his help to that of the IT department. Other attributes that garnered praise were being a great listener with a great sense of humor who grew spectacularly as a professional, willing even to argue with the city manager. The proclamation concluded that Patel epitomizes the Latin motto, ductus exemplo (lead by example).

Patel was surprised to find his young sons as guests of the Zoom meeting. He was delighted with the proclamation, noting that the "very kind words were almost as if I



Mayank Patel Photo provided

wrote them myself and paid somebody to read them."

Downtown subcommittee members Inga Miller and Nick Kosla joined in the praise of Patel. Miller said, "You brought us so much, and I am very, very grateful. You helped pave the way for downtown development," she said. Kosla told Patel that he was personally disappointed he is leaving. "Getting an assignment like the precise plan is a massive task and you were doing the bulk of the work," Kosla told him, "and I have been so impressed at how far you have gotten us. I can't thank you enough for your work. The graphics have been extremely helpful for us to see this stuff. I'm so excited about your future. Your ability during the COVID crisis to keep everybody connected through Zoom, to keep government functioning, I don't know what we would have done without you." Kosla concluded that Orinda would keep an open internship for Patel's children whenever they are ready.

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