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November election features 1% sales tax, contested city council race

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda mayor Darlene Gee and past mayor Inga Miller are running for reelection to the city council, having fulfilled their current four-year terms. A new candidate has also filed and will appear on the ballot: Latika Malkani.

The city council at its Aug.

4 meeting also approved putting a 1% sales tax on the general election ballot. Finance Director Paul Rankin told the city council that 63% of cities in Contra Costa County have sales taxes, that 50% of them have higher taxes than Orinda, and that Moraga already has a 1% sales tax. If passed, the measure would also rescind the

current half-cent sales tax.

Although it is a general tax and cannot be limited to specific allocations, the council indicated that it is their intention to focus on priority needs for the first three to five years of the tax, which is to last for 20 years. Those priorities are wildfire management and disaster planning, high priority

drainage structures, and continued public street maintenance.

The mayor and the vice mayor were authorized to prepare the ballot argument in favor of the tax, as well as the rebuttal to any argument against. If approved, collection of the tax will begin on April 1, 2021.

In other developments, past presidents of the Orinda Union School District Board Hilary Weiner and Cara Hoxie are also running for reelection, but are unopposed, so there will be no OUSD election on the November ballot.

Orinda establishes underground utility district along Camino Pablo near El Toyonal

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda will undertake a project to move overhead utility lines underground in an area alongside Camino Pablo near El Toyonal. The project will create an underground utility district and will be largely funded by money returned to the city by Pacific Gas and Electric Co. under Rule-20A, established by the California Public Utility Commission to require utility companies in California to annually budget funds for use by the communities they serve for such conversions. The rule is specifically limited to lower watt distribution lines and

cannot be used to underground high wattage transmission lines. The proposed distribution lines must be along a collector or arterial road.

In 2004 the city conducted a similar project around Miner Road. Since the amounts allocated per year are small, it is common for agencies to accumulate funds for many years in order to complete a small portion of undergrounding.

City staff recently received some requests to underground electric lines along the west side of Camino Pablo in the vicinity of the El Toyonal intersection after a fire ignited in the area about two months ago.

Having reviewed the existing overhead electric distribution lines, staff determined that the Camino Pablo Underground Utility District would be a good candidate for the city to consider. The proposed length of 2,100 feet is relatively short, with nine utility poles to be removed. This scale of a project is more affordable with the city's current credit balance of \$2,519,172 (with annual allocation of approximately \$72,500). The proposed area is along a major arterial route with two lanes in each direction for more options for traffic control/lane closures during the work, and there are limited

numbers of service connections to private properties. Undergrounding the overhead lines would eliminate the danger that sparking could ignite vegetation and lead to a wildfire.

In addition to paying the cost of undergrounding utilities in the public right-of-way, Rule 20A credits will pay for the installation of up to 100 feet of each customer's underground electric service lateral affected by the undergrounding, and the conversion of electric service panels to accept underground service in an amount up to \$1,500 per service entrance, excluding permit fees. All affected customers/property

owners in the proposed district are expected to be within 100 feet of the underground line. The only expected cost to affected property owners is any cost in excess of the \$1,500 for electric service panel conversion.

By establishing the project, the city averted a risk of losing some of the funds allocated to it. Mayor Darlene Gee requested that there be a revision in the language of the measure to specify that, when the project is completed, the underground lines will still belong to each utility and that they will retain responsibility for their lines within the trenches.

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