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New Measure R Oversight Commission to replace CIOC

By Sora O'Doherty

With the passage of Measure R in the general election, Orinda is committed to establishing an oversight commission to monitor how the funding raised by the new add-on sales tax is spent by the city. In a staff report prepared by Larry Theis, assistant city manager and director of public works, it was recommended to the city council at its Dec. 1 meeting that the existing Citizen Infrastructure Oversight Commission, with its mission limited to infrastructure, be dissolved and replaced by a new oversight commission with a much broader scope.

According to the staff report, the CIOC has done excellent work planning, monitoring, and making recommendations on the use of over \$56 million funding from two voter approved bond issues and the existing add-on sales tax (Measure L - Approved by the voters in 2012). Measure R, however, was adopted as a general sales tax and, as such, the use of the funds raised by the tax cannot legally be specified. The city council has indicated that the funding will be used for a wide range of work, including fire prevention, emergency planning, public drainage improvements to prevent erosion or flooding, as well as the maintenance of the public road system, which has been improved with the current half-cent sales tax. Outgoing city manager Steve Salomon recommended that the council act soon so that the city clerk can recruit people for the oversight commission with the goal of having its first meeting in February or March. Staff will return to the council on Dec. 15 with a scope of work for the committee, which should have from seven to 10 members, and establish a schedule for new, monthly meetings and set clear objectives and goals in concert with the next bi-annual budget.

The report also recommended that certain initial steps be taken, such as preparing an interim short-term spending plan, prior to the establishment of the Citizens Oversight Commission. Staff does recommend support for an increase in the operational budget for immediate vegetation and tree trimming removal on city owned properties such as City Hall, parks, and open spaces, which would include ramping up the elimination of more vegetation, including eucalyptus trees along Camino Pablo.

In addition to the Citizens Oversight Commission, the city plans to hire a program manager to oversee emergency preparedness in Orinda. Salomon told the council that Orinda does not want to duplicate or displace things that MOFD is doing. "We have to develop a good evacuation plan, including a family reconciliation location" where families can meet in the event of a disaster, Salomon said. "Floods will happen again, earthquakes, hazardous material spills will happen."

Salomon said there is no one who can coordinate these efforts on the city staff at present. Because of COVID problems, he said, "we've laid off people and left positions open. I can't think of a more important thing. If you want to do this right, this is what needs to happen." Orinda hired a project manager for roads, he said, but this is different. Fire is an issue that is not going to go away for Orinda, he said, and added that the city will need some consultants to help recruit the right person for the job.

Mayor Darlene Gee suggested that the job would not be to recreate the wheel but utilize plans by MOFD, CERT and the Firewise Council in a coordinated effort.

During public comment, Melanie Light, chair of the Orinda Firewise Council, described the current situation as an "amazing, pivotal moment. We are transforming ourselves into a fire resistant community." Light gave a shout out to Salomon, and urged that education be high priority. In addition to a dedicated project manager, she suggested hosting a "living with wildfire" fair, perhaps underwritten by a corporate sponsor or insurance.

Judd Hammon, chair of the CIOC, noted that there is an expanse of topics that need to be addressed by the new commission. To limit the commission to Measure R would be asking for trouble in his opinion, and concluded that Orinda needs multiple disaster planning.

Council Member Dennis Fay said this is a "turning point for this city" and suggested that the new commission include a designated slot for a Firewise Council member and expressed a need to coordinate with the county's new half-cent countywide sales tax measure as parts of Orinda are in unincorporated county area. Council Member Inga Miller emphasized that Orinda should not limit itself in the charge to the commission, and should include the ability to look for other funding sources.

Council Member Nick Kosla said that the elephant in the room is the eucalyptus trees and big Monterey pines in Orinda that are very difficult and expensive to remove. He suggested that the city work with neighbors, and provide public education, to ensure that there isn't just clearcutting. He also alluded to growth in neighboring cities, and wondered how that will affect evacuation.

Vice Mayor Amy Worth acknowledged the hard work of volunteers in Orinda, who contributed to the passage of Measure R. "We have a real opportunity to look at best practices," she said, "and make best use of technology."

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