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Orinda jump-starts Measure R work

By Sora O'Doherty

The city of Orinda didn't miss a beat getting started on the work voters authorized when they approved Measure R, a supplemental sales tax. Just days after the certification of the election, the city council met on Dec. 17 to establish the new oversight commission required by the measure, and to approve some ideas for how to spend the initial revenue the tax will bring in before the end of fiscal year 2020-21. The following day, the city clerk put out a call for applicants for the oversight commission, as well as for the city's other committees and commissions.

The deadline for applying for the committees and commissions, including the new Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission, is close of business on Jan. 22; interviews will be held on Jan. 30 and in February there will be term expirations, as well as the new positions of the SSTOC. According to the call for applications, the SSTOC was recently formed to oversee funding from Measure R and make spending recommendations to the city council. The new commission will also review priority needs of the city addressing the threat of wildfire; disaster response planning; repair of critical drainage facilities; and the long-term maintenance of public roads. There will be from seven to 10 members of the SSTOC, which will replace the long-standing Citizens Infrastructure Oversight Commission.

Before the Commission can get up and running, however, staff brought to the city council some ideas of how to spend the first revenue brought in by the new tax. Although the tax will begin being collected next April, the city will not actually see the revenue until late May or early June. Finance Director Paul Rankin anticipates that the revenue expected for the latter half of fiscal year 2020-21 will be approximately \$600,000. Staff presented the city council with a plan to spend between \$400,000 to \$600,000. The plan includes funding an Orinda-only chipper crew at a cost of \$40,000 to \$60,000, and purchasing a maintenance truck and a towable chipper machine for another \$120,000 to \$150,000, plus general equipment maintenance tools, fuel, disposal fees and miscellaneous equipment at a cost of \$10,000 to \$40,000 and another \$80,000 to \$120,000 for tree trimming and removal on city-maintained properties. This chipper portion of the plan was enthusiastically welcomed both by the council and the public, many of whom suggested that the council move forward with two chipper crews and equipment for Orinda. However, it was the sense of the council that the city should try walking before running, and get an understanding of how the program will work.

Two proposals considered lower priority or requiring more research involved bulk purchasing home vent-hardening material for discounted purchase by verified Orinda residents and installing fencing at Orinda Oaks Park to allow for animal grazing to continuously mitigate wildfire fuel. Council members appreciated that Lamorinda CERT is already working on a vent-hardening project, and felt that more information was needed on the costs of various alternatives for dealing with the wildfire danger at the city-owned Orinda Oaks Park and adjacent Mulholland Ridge Open Space. The council members understood that the area is of high priority to MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker, and that the city risks being cited for being in violation of the Fire Code if nothing is done, but there were questions about whether grazing was the best way forward, and if so, what types of animals and what type of fencing would be best. The council also agreed that both the name and the bylaws of the new commission could be amended in the future.

Resident Latika Malkani recommended that the council consider some additional diversity criteria, including demographic diversity, and urged the council to consider adding newer residents to the commission, as well as people who can facilitate communications with the community. Lastly, she urged the council to consider appointing some community member or members who may have opposed Measure R and who may be concerned about how the tax money is spent. Malkani clarified that she herself voted for the new tax.

Resident Charles Porges was concerned about the broad proposed scope of the commission, and worried that it wouldn't be possible to find enough local expertise to fill all those roles, such as dealing with all possible emergencies, fire, earthquakes, floods, evacuations, as well as roads and drains. He inquired if the commission would have a budget that would allow for hiring consultants, or if it would need to come to the city council for permission for each consultant.

Jud Hammon, chair of the CIOC, expressed his appreciation to the council and staff for diving in so quickly, noting that it shows a real understanding of how important the problem really is.

The Statement of Interest form for Orinda committees and commissions is available at <https://tinyurl.com/orindaform> or by contacting Sheri Smith, City Clerk at ssmith@cityoforinda.org or calling (925) 253-4221.

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