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Conversation continues on how to spend American Rescue Plan millions

By Sora O'Doherty

The city of Orinda is getting approximately \$4.8 million from the American Rescue Plan over two years. There are complicated federal requirements and restrictions on the use of the funding, and the Orinda City Council is trying to assess how to make the best use of the money. Among the requirements, the funds must be obligated by the end of 2024 and expended by the end of 2026.

Unlike many jurisdictions, Orinda is fortunate to be surviving the COVID-19 pandemic without running into deficit spending. This is not the first time the council has discussed the use of the incoming funds. They started the discussion when considering the budget and capital improvements projects in June. The conversation is also not at an end, as new federal guidelines are expected to be available in August, so the matter will return to the council next month. However, staff were seeking to get a feeling for the council's preferred direction for the funding.

The council maintains its aim to use the money for one-time capital improvements that will not require ongoing funding. Additionally, they are looking for a few projects that will be manageable, as opposed to a broad array of projects that would require more staff attention and might run the risk of not being completed by the program deadline.

On Aug. 3, administrative services director Paul Rankin presented a report to the council that made suggestions in five categories for the use of the money. Rankin suggested spending \$150,000 on local roads safety plan implementation, \$560,955 on facility maintenance major components, \$500,000 on assessment of technology and enhancements, \$556,767 on underfunded or unfunded capital projects, and \$3 million on storm water infrastructure.

For local roads safety, staff suggested a guardrail on Overhill Road. Council Member Nick Kosla suggested that a guardrail would also be appropriate for a section of El Toyonal. For facility maintenance, staff suggested a major modernization of the library public elevator. In the category of technology, staff suggested three projects: information technology assessment and strategic plan, \$100,000; funding to implement key information technology plan recommendations, \$200,000; and records management system, \$100,000. The largest use of the funds is proposed to be the 2023-24 Storm Water Project, with construction estimated at \$3 million.

In the underfunded/unfunded capital projects category, staff said that the director of parks and recreation suggests the Oaks Park

Restroom Replacement as a potential candidate. At first the council did not think this was the best candidate. However, the project rose in priority when the council realized that the building, which currently consists of is a wood frame with shake roof built in 1992, may constitute a fire hazard. The estimated cost is \$100,000. One project that rose to a higher level of priority with the council is the replacement of the missing decorative tiles on the Orinda Library, which is highly visible to the public. It had not been included in the suggestions from staff because it is already a funded capital improvement project, but the council suggested that it could be effected with the federal funds, leaving more funding from other sources dedicated to the library for other uses, including funding longer library opening hours or potentially postponing going back to the public for another bond issue.

Having received the sense of the council, staff will update its proposal and present it to the Finance Advisory Committee at a public meeting before returning to the city council for final adoption of a spending plan.

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[back](#)

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