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Wildfire prevention and preparedness tops Lafayette's budget items list

By Lou Fancher

Lafayette Administrative Services Director Tracy Robinson in presenting to the council the Fiscal Year 2022-23 proposed budget and work plan addressed four goals set this year by the council she described as "very ambitious." Wildfire prevention and preparedness topped the list that included improving pedestrian and traffic safety and mobility, creating a downtown and Mt. Diablo Corridor Specific Plan, and developing short- and long-term fiscal sustainability plans.

Robinson said the budget proposal also included full year funding for newly authorized staffing positions and for additional office space that will be necessary as the staff expands. The cost for additional staff is approximately \$675,000 per year; the expense for additional space comes from the General Fund. At the end of the fiscal 2021-22 period on June 30, the General Fund Reserve is projected to be at an estimated 86% due to the council's careful fiscal management, according to Robinson. She said the city remains in "good and robust financial health" in part because of adjustments to the timing of ongoing and planned programs.

Revenue trends beginning in 2019 and mapped annually through 2022 show the city is making a faster than expected recovery, but is behind the growth that would have happened had the pandemic not occurred. Special revenue the city did receive includes the first tranche of the American Rescue Plan Act that has been allocated, with a second tranche expected in July. The total of the two disbursements is \$3.18 million and money coming in from the second tranche will be reserved in a sinking fund and released as approved.

A second source of city revenue is the Palos Colorados settlement of \$2.25 million. This money has been allocated to the Vision Zero capital projects and safety improvements around schools (see related story on Page A3).

New staffing and the resulting additional office space Robinson showed are projected to put the city in a deficit situation in roughly three years. In fiscal year 2023 the reserve dips and by 2025 would fall below the 60% threshold.

Unfunded requests under consideration included improvements to the Community Center, allocations to Lamorinda Village, money for an economic development manager contract, pre-engineering for the School Street Project and others. The total added up to just over \$1 million. Projecting forward with continuing structural deficits and increased inflation impacts, Robinson said the net effect will force the city to reduce the number of projects planned. ARPA money, she reiterated, could fund the requests and cover shortfalls, but cautioned the one-time money is a short-term fix.

When Vice Mayor Carl Anduri asked for clarification about the fiscal surplus of \$1.8 million in 2021 included in Robinson's report and whether it represented an amount over the 60% reserve, not actual cash, Robinson reiterated that tranche 2 of the ARPA funds is not a part of those budget figures.

Anduri asked about funds for wildfire weed abatement and tree maintenance and if that is a stable figure or one that increases year-to-year. Robinson replied that the expenditures for those purposes do not necessarily increase, unless allocations from a general fund that are directed to maintain streets and trees is specifically designated for wildfire safety.

During public comments, Suzy Pak, a volunteer for Lamorinda Village, advocated for continued support and funding allocation for the nonprofit. Robert Lavoie suggested the city not apply ARPA funds for additional office space and instead save the funds for other use by having new staff members work remotely.

Robinson responded to Lavoie, explaining that only \$135,000 of the \$650,000 budget item for additional staff and space would go to office space and would not relieve "the bulk" of that deficit. Issues the council she suggested would have to consider in regard to remote workers are lost efficiency, the impact on workers' home lives, jobs that require in-office consultations and other concerns. "It might, over time, cause problems," she said.

Council discussion relating to actions recommended by Robinson and staff regarding unfunded requests included possible delays or denials of approvals for unfunded items and the timing for approvals or further fact gathering by staff. Using tranche 1 ARPA funds to pay for items was determined to be the best solution for the necessary items needing funding.

Ultimately, the council directed Robinson on next steps related to the base budget, unfunded requests, use of ARPA funds, and confirmed the council at the June 27 meeting will select members of the Financial Sustainability Subcommittee.

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