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City Council nixes SSTOC study

By Sora O'Doherty

The Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission (SSTOC) brought a proposal to the Orinda City Council on Feb. 6, seeking authorization to spend about \$21,000 of Measure R funds on a community survey designed to provide a benchmark of Orinda attitudes toward wild fire prevention, but the council determined that the study was unnecessary and denied the request.

The SSTOC was formed in accordance with Measure R, a voter-approved increase in the sales tax to one cent for a period of 20 years from its adoption in 2020. Although it is a general tax, and therefore not tied to any particular expenditures of the city, Orinda said that the funds would be used primarily to improve wild fire safety and to continue road and drain maintenance. Measure R generates approximately \$2.4 million per year.

Commissioners Rachele Latimer and Paula Reinman presented the SSTOC's proposal to the council with a number of different options on how to conduct the survey with various prices. Latimer noted that the city is spending over \$1 million annually on fire safety, and that the goal of the SSTOC is to develop a baseline understanding against which to measure future progress.

Commissioner Reinman reported that the SSTOC had talked to two firms in order to get a ballpark idea of costs before embarking on a request for proposals. In order to be statistically significant, about 400 responses would be required, and it was expected that that is achievable.

Council Member Janet Reilly wondered if a survey was really necessary. Council Member Brandyn Iverson asked if the SSTOC has considered focus groups as an alternative. Mayor Darlene Gee asked if the SSTOC had found any other community who had actually conducted this type of programmatic survey, as opposed to the types of surveys conducted by Orinda to judge the appetite of the community for a ballot measure. Latimer told the council that while most of the state is trying to get programs up and running, they are not focused on asking why people are not making behavioral changes. "We'll be cutting edge in the state," she concluded.

Iverson said that there seems to be a lot of low-hanging fruit, such as free gutter guards. But Reinman countered that just because people took the gutter guards doesn't mean that they have installed them. Iverson had perhaps set the tone of the meeting earlier, when she pulled an item from the consent calendar, to ask questions about why the city spent money on consultants and studies for ADA parking improvements and new crosswalks.

Council Member Inga Miller pointed out that Connect Orinda was wildly successful with a one-day event in the library garden room, which was packed with people. She wondered if the SSTOC might do something similar. Reinman responded that asking people to walk around Orinda to say how they would like Orinda to look is "very different from telling people that you have a 20 or 30 thousand dollar problem in your yard." She also stated that while the work of individuals is important, "you need the whole neighborhood to do it before everyone is safe."

Reilly favored the idea of conducting a study only through city channels, and said that she didn't "buy the argument that that wouldn't capture unengaged citizens." Iverson did not support the survey. Miller emphasized that the city had no experience with programmatic surveys, only election surveys, where the motivation to respond is high because it affects what will go on the ballot.

The council proceeded with a motion to not approve the survey. On the first vote, Council Member Reilly abstained. City attorney Osa Wolff intervened to explain that Orinda has a unique rule, which is not general parliamentary procedure, that in the event of a tie vote, the motion fails. Since the motion under consideration was a negative one to not approve the survey, the effect of Reilly's abstention would be to approve the survey. Reilly then changed her vote to aye, meaning that the motion to not approve the survey succeeded.

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