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Published October 26th, 2011

Roads, Drains, and Financial Pains

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When Abraham Lincoln wrote, "The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do ... for themselves - in their separate, and individual capacities," he might very well have been speaking to those who reside in and govern Orinda. For it was in that same commentary that Lincoln listed public roads and highways among the responsibilities of "the machinery of government."

That machinery was operating in high gear on October 18 as the Orinda City Council presented a two-hour roads workshop before its regularly scheduled meeting. Informed by a series of five open public meetings conducted by the City Council Roads Sub-Committee (CRS) from May through October, and monthly meetings of the Finance Advisory and Citizens Infrastructure Oversight (CIOC) committees, the Council's workshop was a study in civic duty. Participants explored factors impacting the costs involved in maintaining Orinda's 92.8 miles of roads. Discussion surrounded the City's prudent use of funds, ability to ensure safe routes to schools, and the geographic equity of repairs, and was supported by a staff report filled with charts conveying a dizzying degree of detail. Everything's available on the City's web site, www.ci.orinda.ca.us.

Worst First vs.

Road Network Allocation

Chuck Swanson, Director of Orinda's Department of Public Works and Engineering Services, noted that members of the CIOC are "very concerned about the condition of residential roads" as he presented two possible plans for road and drainage system repair to the Council. Road conditions would be restored, at a minimum, to good or very good condition and 1940s-era storm drains nearing the end of their lives would be upgraded. Funding for either option would be generated through a series of ballot measures conducted over a four to eight year period.

Swanson explained that a "worst first" option would enable staff to focus their attention primarily on residential streets, prioritizing and working their way up their infrastructure repair list. Funding from Return-to-Source (Measure J), gas taxes, and garbage franchise fees of roughly \$800,000 to \$1 million each year would be dedicated to arterials and collectors.

Alternatively, by employing a "road network allocation" approach, residential streets, arterials, school routes, and collectors would continue to be used as classifications for repair allocations. Swanson advised council members that, under this strategy, they would need to determine what percentage of funding would be designated for each classification to ensure that each category would eventually be addressed. Measure J funds, gas taxes, and garbage fees would then be devoted to annual pavement and maintenance projects.

Under both plans, three \$20 million bond measures or two \$30 million bond measures would be needed to facilitate completion of the estimated \$60 million it will take to completely fix Orinda's infrastructure. A citizens' committee would serve in an oversight capacity, making annual recommendations regarding the sequencing of construction and repairs.

A third option posed by the CIOC is also available to the Council, under which 80 percent of available funds would be allocated to residential roads with the remaining 20 percent broken out for the remaining classifications (arterials, collectors, and school routes).

Revenue Options

Staff then presented its Summary of City of Orinda Road Funding Options, illustrating the in depth research and analysis that has been undertaken by staff in concert with various City Council and resident advisory groups. This two-page chart outlines a wide range of revenue generating strategies, and explains the pros and cons of each. Discussions centered primarily on three of these possible funding streams: the creation of assessment districts, the use of a parcel tax, or the adoption of an ad-valorem tax.

Assessment districts, if implemented, would be tailored to defined neighborhoods with assessments levied based on property values within those neighborhoods. Assessments would be approved based on a weighted majority of voting property owners. The Council wanted legal advice before it could fully consider this strategy, and also asked staff to obtain details from the League of California Cities about the administration of assessment districts operated by other cities.

Examples of possible parcel and ad-valorem taxes were provided "for illustrative purposes only." With a \$100 per parcel per year tax, staff estimated that approximately \$700,000 per year could be generated - an amount that would securitize at three percent over a 20-year period to roughly \$10.4 million or \$13.7 million over a 30-year period.

With a general obligation bond of \$150 per \$1 million of assessed value, staff explained that an ad-valorem tax could generate similar amounts over the same timeframes. By implementing either tax, the City could demonstrate for residents its ability to efficiently complete infrastructure projects on time while retaining the flexibility to assess the state of the economy before requesting public approval for future ballot measures.

Other options less likely to be implemented included such things as a utility users' tax, a real property transfer tax, and a city sales and use tax. Council Member Sue Severson suggested adding another funding option - for residents to choose to do nothing, but also advised that residents selecting this path should be made aware of the consequences of allowing the continued deterioration of Orinda's infrastructure.

Next Steps

City Council and staff will continue to expand their outreach to the community. Residents are invited and encouraged to attend a second roads workshop on November 15, 2011.

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