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Water Facility Negotiations Continue

By Cathy Tyson



Larry Blodgett on the parcel in front of the store
Photo Cathy Tyson

Back in June of 2011, the City of Lafayette and EBMUD, the East Bay Municipal Utility District, agreed in concept on a land swap in order for EBMUD to move forward with preliminary planning for a new and vastly improved water pumping facility just down Mt. Diablo Boulevard from the existing Diablo Vista Pumping Plant between Ace Hardware and Svensson Automotive.

EBMUD proposes trading the land where the 1950's era pumping plant is - for a currently unused right-of-way parcel next to the cemetery and in front of Blodgett's Abbey Carpet & Floor Covering. Once the new facility is built and functional, the City proposes turning that small constrained lot next to Ace into badly needed parking. The proposed new location for the pumping plant is attractive to EBMUD because it's easily accessible for construction and is directly adjacent to major water pipelines.

While everyone agrees a reliable source of water is a good thing, the devil is in the details. One slightly messy detail is the ownership of the parcel in front of Blodgett's. Ownership of the parcel at the corner of Diablo Court and Mt. Diablo Boulevard was in limbo. Years ago when Highway 24 was widened to accommodate BART, the streets in that

area were re-aligned. The newly created excess right-of-way land was never officially transferred from the County to the City of Lafayette as is the norm. "To rectify this, Contra Costa County has agreed to quitclaim the right-of-way to the City of Lafayette," noted a staff report that also finds the move consistent with the General Plan.

Future neighbor to the proposed project, Larry Blodgett of Blodgett's Abbey Carpet & Floor Covering on Diablo Court, has a few concerns, "I want to be a good neighbor," he says, but the possibly of future expansion of the plant and construction mayhem have him worried. "I'm not opposed to the project - I get that it's for the greater good," but current uncertainties are troubling. He obviously has a vested interest in keeping the business that's been in the family for generations thriving. "It's really going to be tough to do business (during construction), we're bracing ourselves - it's hard enough in this tough economy," he said.

At issue is the fact that EBMUD is "fully autonomous" said Bill Fitzpatrick, Manager of Water Distribution Planning. While the Planning Commission and City Council can offer suggestions on the size and design of the new pumping plant, EBMUD, because it's a utility, is not required to conform to the city's wishes. However the city may have some key leverage; City Council Member Don Tatzin pointed out that the city is not required to swap or sell the parcel to the utility.

Looking to be collaborative and working in good faith, discussions between the City and EBMUD are on-going about how to memorialize what both parties want. Blodgett is especially concerned about access and visibility from Mt. Diablo Boulevard, and would prefer that the portion of the right-of-way land directly in front of his store remain vacant. "I'd prefer a low building and low landscaping," he said.

"This plant is our number one priority," said Kirkpatrick describing the project. Just this past week there was a field trip to the property with EBMUD's architect and landscape designers. "We fully intend to work with neighbors," he added. They will be reaching out to the community to discuss concerns and recognize priorities. "My hope is this is very good project for everyone," Kirkpatrick said. Check the city website at www.lovelafayette.com for future Planning Commission meetings discussing the proposed pumping plant.

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