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Pinching Pennies Orinda City Council and staff roll up sleeves at budget workshop

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The week of budget woes continued as Council members and staff reviewed the City of Orinda's current and projected finances in painstaking detail at a morning budget workshop May 17.

The City's General Fund Operating Revenues will be \$236,045 less than first estimated for Fiscal Year 2013 - the lion's share of the loss attributed to declines in property tax revenues and the "In lieu of Vehicle License Fees" line item - reductions of \$182,733 and \$73,642, respectively.

In addition, according to the City of Orinda Management Summary: Tax Year 2011-12 prepared for City leaders by MuniServices, "The secured and unsecured assessment rolls for 2011-12 show that the assessed value of taxable properties within the City of Orinda decreased by -3.18 percent over the previous year, 2010-2011." And, an "analysis of sales occurring within the City of Orinda since the 2011-12 roll year release (July 2011) indicates that 162 sales resulted in a decline in value of approximately \$10,000,000."

As a result, City Council members probed the nooks and crannies of each City department's budget, balancing the desire to reduce operational costs with the need to deliver mandated and vital services. The City Clerk's budget will increase by roughly \$30,000 from Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 to FY 2013 due to biennial statewide election costs while City Manager Keeter's budget will decrease by approximately \$20,000 due largely to cuts in Keeter's salary and benefits.

The Planning Department anticipates saving roughly \$40,000 due to staffing adjustments while Parks and Recreation estimates that it will be able to reduce its budget by \$141,584 due to savings derived from lower salaries for the new Parks and Recreation Director and certain temporary staff positions, along with the transformation of a full-time Recreation Supervisor II job, through attrition, into a full-time Recreation Coordinator position.

The most intensive scrutiny came during the review of the Orinda Police Department's budget. Expenditures related to Investigation and Community Policing are projected to increase from \$295,201 and \$199,341 to \$310,262 and \$219,509, respectively, with the biggest ticket item - Patrol costs - anticipated to jump from \$2,574,487 in FY12 to \$2,871,137.

Council Member Sue Severson expressed concern regarding the chunk OPD's budget now takes out of the overall City coffers - up from 27 percent of the City's operations in 2008 to its present 41 percent share. "I don't see that this trend can continue," she said. Noting that her comments were not meant to convey that the City does not value the work of its police force, she explained that the City must look at its present service model to be sure that what the City agreed to initially in its contract with the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department still reflects what Orinda's residents want and truly need.

Council members asked City Manager Janet Keeter and Orinda Police Chief Jeffrey Jennings to explore further possible efficiencies, including assessing the manner in which officers with greater and lesser experience are rotated in and out of the City and how this might be influencing the City's overall contract costs with the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department.

The City Manager and department heads will examine the feedback given by Council members and investigate other cost saving options before returning with a revised forecast to another budget workshop likely to be held in late May or early June.

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