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Published June 6th, 2012

City Council and Staff Work to Close Projected Budget Gap

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The latest in a series of budget workshops was held by the Orinda City Council at a special session May 22. Presented at the meeting that was open to, but only lightly attended by, members of the general public were documents not yet publicly available on the City's web site.

Staff recommended that Council members approve a "Most Likely" Revenue Scenario outlined in the Update of General Fund Adopted Budget: Fiscal Year 2013 (FY 2013). Working from a proposed revenue base of \$10,137,614 with expenditures of \$10,027,619, the City would have seen a small surplus of \$109,995 - were it not for shortfalls in Planning and Permit Review fees of \$45,000; Property Tax Projections, a one percent drop equaling \$182,773; In-lieu-of Vehicle License Fees, a one percent drop equaling \$73,642; and Pending Appeals, \$9,000 - a total hole for the Council to plug of \$200,420.

In contrast, staff also presented their "Pessimistic" Revenue Scenario, estimating the deficit at \$381,034. This would occur if the City takes in lower franchise fees, experiences drops by another percent each in property taxes and vehicle license fees, sees even lower revenue from planning and permit review, and has its Supplemental Law Enforcement Services (SLESF) grant of \$100,000 cut by the State of California.

"We remain hopeful that we will be made whole for this year," said City Manager Janet Keeter when asked if Orinda will lose its \$100,000 SLESF public safety grant. The City, she explained, just received \$78,000 of that grant on May 18, delayed because the State of California is behind in processing its payments.

Options for balancing the FY 2013 budget included:

Organization restructuring and efficiencies \$98,189

Eliminate Reserve Officer - Police \$50,000

Eliminate Detective Sergeant \$240,540

Eliminate Detective Officer \$200,000

Eliminate Planner \$93,468

Reduce FY 13 General Fund transfer

to Internal Service Funds \$97,345

Furlough Days @ \$11,000 per day \$11,000

Council Member Sue Severson observed that the Planning Department has already cut one-and-a-half positions and faces "the unpredictability of new projects coming on," and voiced concerns that the Orinda Police Department (OPD) "is the one department that has not made any cuts to date." She asked whether or not there might be a way to reduce an officer's position to a half-time role, and also proposed that the City seek further efficiencies from its vehicle replacement program by lengthening the life of vehicles.

Council Member Victoria Smith asked Orinda Police Chief Jeffrey Jennings to assess the potential impact of each staff reduction scenario. Eliminating the Reserve Officer would not be possible, he explained, because it would impair the department's ability to operate safely while maintaining the City's current level of expected service. The Reserve Officer is brought on board when others are off duty for a variety of reasons, including training.

Jennings then informed Council members that if OPD is required to eliminate a position it will need to be that of the Detective Officer, but he cautioned that the loss of either detective would reduce OPD's ability to crack burglary and other criminal cases. "It's not a model that will catch the most criminals," he said, explaining that "the investigator would be so inundated" that he would not have time to devote to other programs residents have come to rely on, such as school policing and neighborhood watch programs.

Vice Mayor Amy Worth, pointing out that "conviction keeps up the deterrent factor" for criminals bent on victimizing Orinda residents, also observed that if the Police Department is forced to drop an officer, the City would still end up paying in two ways - by incurring increased overtime as other members of the force pick up the workload of the departing officer and in a reduction in services to residents.

The Council next queried Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu regarding the impact of eliminating, or decreasing to half-time, a Planner and were advised that the department would likely need to cut its service hours back significantly - only offering counter operations half of each day.

Worrying over potentially decreased City revenues and aware that the department had worked hard to speed up its processing of applications, several Council members suggested that it might be more advisable for Ursu to give his staff more time to process paperwork in order to enable more flexible counter hours for the public. To which Keeter observed that staff "would have to manage expectations on turnaround time."

Smith asked, since the department is estimating reductions in Planning and Permit Review fees, whether or not there might be a corresponding reduction in the workload of staff. Ursu responded that staff could instead be directed to focus more on code enforcement and other duties.

Council Member Dean Orr suggested that a half-time position devoted to permitting and fee-servicing items would likely not work well due to the nature of those jobs, but that non-fee generating duties could be assigned to a half-time employee.

Worth wondered whether Planning Department programs such as the Mayor's Award for Architectural Excellence and funds expended for web site development were as important when weighed against the possible reduction to or elimination of police services.

Council members decided not to eliminate the OPD Reserve Officer, unanimously approved the organizational restructuring and efficiencies option proposed by staff, and elected to leave all other items on the table for discussion at the next budget workshop on June 5.

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