

Published March 31st, 2021

Orinda gears up for fire protection with new oversight commission, chipper and vehicle

By Sora O'Doherty



Chipper ♦ Manufacturer: Bandit Model: 15XP
Drum Style Brush Bandit 139 hp engine

At its first meeting on March 10, the newly formed Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission (SSTOC) - the successor to the very influential Citizens Infrastructure Oversight Commission, which was formed to oversee expenditures of the previously approved sales tax revenue and has now been disbanded - received and considered a report on the chipper program and the plan for the city of Orinda to purchase a chipper and a truck to tow it.

Although the recently passed sales tax increase in Orinda is a general tax, and therefore the city council is not obligated to spend it in any particular way, the council is intent on keeping its promises made during the campaign, including making the first focus of spending the tax on increasing fire safety in Orinda - and it's the impetus behind the council agreeing on the rapid purchase of the truck and chipper.

The commission raised several questions regarding the efficacy of purchasing over renting equipment and whether the chipper selected would limit the city program to tree limbs of six-inches or less. Staff explained that the practical reasons for the limit include worker safety, the ability to efficiently remove debris, the ability to remove more fuel by including grasses and brush and the potential reduction of services that could be provided if larger pieces of wood were to require more time, in addition to the benefit of maintaining consistency with the existing Moraga-Orinda Fire District chipper program. The commissioners concluded that in view of the urgency of the upcoming fire season, there is a need to prioritize getting the program into operation rather than spending additional time on research. Staff reported that it may be appropriate to discuss the matter in the future when replacement equipment is required or when there is a program focused specifically on trees, as opposed to branches.

This report also was taken up by the city council on March 16, at which time the city agreed to waive the requirement that the city manager pursue a bid process based on a standard specification and allow him to approve a purchase through negotiation. Staff said that they will report back to the city council on the final terms and budget impact.

The city council appointed 10 commissioners in February and named as the first, temporary chair, Jud Hammon, who will serve for the first year. In order to assure staggered terms in the future, the 10 commissioners were given randomly selected initial terms of one, two or three years.

As terms expire, the city will invite applications for the positions. Typically, said Mayor Amy Worth who attended the first SSTOC meeting, there is a likelihood that the council will want to reappoint members upon the conclusion of their terms, although she added that she couldn't guarantee it, but that it has been past practice. In established commissions, she said, commissioners frequently are reappointed until they no longer wish to serve.

Addressing the new commissioners, Vice Mayor Dennis Fay thanked them all for volunteering. "As the Mayor said, this city runs on volunteers who are very, very talented and you guys are the best." He said that the roles and responsibilities of the commission are broad and challenging, but that wildfire is its first priority. "Be patient," he advised, "you cannot take on everything all at once. Focus on a few things, get them done." Fay also advised the new commissioners to familiarize themselves with issues of conflicts of interest and the Brown Act regarding public meetings.

In public comments, Charles Porges welcomed the commissioners. "You are responsible for allocating and prioritizing funds to all necessary element for the public good. Fire prevention is number one by extensive public demand," he said. He urged the commissioners to make sure the money is well spent in the proper priority. A longtime proponent of residents of private roads getting some help from the city, Porges said he has sent an email on the subject to the new commissioners.

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