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Tri-City Council meeting focuses on transportation issues

By Sora O'Doherty

As the cities of Lafayette and Orinda and the town of Moraga grapple with trying to provide for hugely increased regional housing needs assessments, representatives heard from the Contra Costa Transportation Authority (CCTA) that lack of roadway capacity will no longer be a viable reason to disapprove residential growth projects foreseen in a housing element.

City council members from Lafayette and town council members from Moraga joined Orinda city council members for the annual tri-city meeting held on Zoom March 21. CCTA Director John Hoang gave a presentation about upcoming planning for countywide transportation, including the use of funds from the county's half-cent transportation sales tax passed in 2004. Measure J. David Early, of consultant Placeworks, joined in the presentation.

The Measure J growth management program seeks to manage the impact of land use decisions on the transportation system; 18% of the income from the tax is returned to the cities, but requires compliance through a checklist. This is relevant because questions arose during the meeting about whether or not cities might be penalized for noncompliance if some roads in Lamorinda are classified as routes of regional significance.

The program seeks to focus new development away from green fields, preserving valuable agricultural lands and reducing the need for new infrastructure. The plan applies goals, objectives and performance measures to major arterials, transit lines and trails. New developments must mitigate negative impacts to Multimodal Transportation Service Objectives (MTSOs). Neighboring jurisdictions are required to work together when planning for growth and to protect communities downstream from development.

According to CCTA, the successes of the action plan for Lamorinda include the fourth bore of the Caldecott tunnel, Moraga Way multimodal improvements, transportation for Livable Communities project grants, livable Moraga Way and Canyon Road Bridge improvements. CCTA is currently in the process of updated its action plans and is seeking big, bold ideas to enhance Contra Costa's transportation network. The agency is seeking public input through a series of public meetings.

The County Action Plan is intended to address transportation issues of today, to establish quantitative service objectives, identify regional routes, provide growth management program compliance metrics and to expand MTSOs to become Regional Transportation Objectives for roadways, transit, bike/pedestrian, technology, safety, climate change and equity. Transportation plans are closely tied to local growth and housing, as well as to local safety elements.

Lafayette Council Member Susan Candall asked about the public meetings CCTA is holding. Through the public meetings, of which there will be two more rounds, CCTA is seeking comments about most important initiatives that can be taken over the next 25 years. There is also an interactive exercise on its website. Early explained that the concept of a route of regional significance is unique to Contra Costa County, not to be found in state or federal legislation. Of the five action plans in Contra Costa County, only Lamorinda has routes of interregional significance. Early advised that these should be changed to routes of regional significance, to avoid having multiple confusing designations.

He suggested that the designation might also give a little boost to grant applications.

Orinda Vice Mayor Inga Miller, while noting that communities are no longer permitted to disallow a housing development on the basis of inadequate roadway capacity, wondered if there will be funding opportunities, and that answer was that there will be funds available over the next 10 years.

Moraga Town Council Member Teresa Onoda brought up the issue of planning for wildfires. Matt Kelly, Contra Costa County Senior Transportation Planner, said that CCTA is hearing about that, especially from Lamorinda, so they are trying to incorporate fire into the transportation plan.

Early said that Placeworks is working on a project specific to the city of Orinda to quantify evacuation capacity and that it may become a model for other communities. He also answered a question from the Lamorinda Weekly, explaining that in an evacuation there will be a carefully controlled flow of cars and that making the roads one-way out will allow for increased capacity.

There was also some discussion about whether traffic patterns will change in the future, as a result of behaviors developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kelly said that CCTA is trying to figure that out in a travel behavior study, and Orinda Mayor Dennis Fay wished them good luck in "getting people to tell you what they really think they are going to do."

Lafayette Mayor Teresa Geringer stressed that their city is committed to a traffic safety plan. Early agreed, saying that safety is of the utmost importance and will be reflected in the action plan. Worth added that all three communities are very concerned about bicycle and pedestrian safety.

The Action Plans and Countywide Transportation Plan (CTP) will be updated over the next two years. While the CTP Update will be informed by the Action Plan Updates, there will be combined outreach events that provide stakeholders and the public with opportunities to provide input on both. The Action Plan Updates and CTP Update process is anticipated to be completed by fall 2023.

Residents can learn more about the Contra Costa County action plan, get involved, and share their thoughts at ccta.net/ctp

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