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Council solidifies next fiscal year's priorities

By Lou Fancher

City Manager Niroop Srivatsa, provided council at the June 10 meeting with an introductory review of the council's and the city staff's work-to-date on the plans for fiscal year 24-25, which begins in July.

In March 2024, the Council had held a special workshop to review the status of current work plans priorities, hear a presentation on the city's finances and staff capacity, and set three priorities for the next fiscal year. The priorities were identified to be: developing a fiscal sustainability plan for short- and long-term needs; defining wildfire prevention, preparedness, and responsiveness and utility safety; and completing the downtown/Mt. Diablo Corridor enhancement plan.

Staff in March 2024 then clarified the necessary tasks and considered the priorities of the council. They reviewed the work plans in light of current staffing shortages and projected budget deficits to identify delays that might be necessary due to the considerable obstacles and established timelines.

In the council's discussion at the meeting, most of the focus was on issues related to the Mount Diablo corridor and the concerns about staffing, funding, and timing that might be challenged by actually meeting the current deadlines.

Council Member John McCormick highlighted the schedule for completing the downtown design standards in particular, suggesting the September deadline was surprising and seemed too soon. Planning and Building Director Greg Wolff responded, saying, "You're right, it is a short overall time frame. The initial, Phase One objective standards took 10 months, but that was at a slower cadence." He said that because the housing element is critical and approval of the design standards is a required step towards completing it, the process is being streamlined. Council will have the option to accept any changes made to the design plan draft or to further the discussion before formal adoption. Joint sessions held with referral bodies involved in the process would help to expedite the process, Wolff added.

Asked by council member Susan Candell about criticism that the city's point system design standards were not robust enough, Wolff said the objective standards could be revised to require development projects to achieve more stringent, clear standards. Wolff suggested that including examples, such as listing specific lighting or material requirements on a property, would be possible. The council agreed specificity would be better or could be added to supplement and improve upon the current points system. Wolff said more information is readily available than when the first drafts were written, and it would be possible to implement more detail in the standards.

Council member Carl Anduri asked about the reality of completing this and other work plans under the city's three priorities, especially the plans related to downtown development along the Mount Diablo Corridor. He emphasized the importance of the multi-modality planning aimed at reducing the number of vehicles in the downtown core and the traffic impact it introduces. Projections show current housing development in Lafayette-if all the potential units are built-will double the number of people living in the downtown. "What can we do to rethink our downtown so that people don't have to use cars at the per capita level they're using them now?" Anduri asked. Answering his own question, he suggested that hiring a consultant capable of taking a "big picture" perspective on the situation might lead to an innovative, "big picture" solution.

After discussion and recognition of improvements already made by the city in traffic-calming measures already taken, especially involving school safety and speed reduction initiatives and enforcement, the council unanimously accepted staff's recommendation to approve the work plans as presented. Council will conduct a midyear review in December in conjunction with the adoption of the Final Budget.

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