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Orinda Evaluates Police Service Options

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By many measures, Orinda receives high-level police services from the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office (CCCSO). The City's \$3.9 million contract for law enforcement services from the CCCSO represents 35% of the City's \$11 million budget. The multi-million dollar question facing the City Council is whether the cost of the CCCSO contract, which is expected to increase significantly over the next several years, is sustainable. To identify options to address this fiscal dilemma, Orinda, along with the cities of Danville and Lafayette, commissioned the Matrix Consulting Group to conduct a police services study, which was outlined to the City Council at a public workshop on December 7th.

Going forward, the total cost of the CCCSO contract is expected to increase considerably due to rising retirement benefit expenses, but by how much is unclear. The City has received conflicting information on cost projections for retirement benefits. "We won't know exactly what next year's [CCCSO contract] retirement costs until January of 2010," stated City Manager Janet Keeter.

Local agencies across the State are wrestling with how to manage the escalating costs of funding public employee pension benefit programs, and some estimates project pension costs will double in the next five years. Orinda resident Carol Penskar, who serves as the Chair of the City's Finance Advisory Committee, pointed out that, even with the unknowns, in the next fiscal year the City will pay more in retirement benefits to the CCCSO than in salaries for the 14 sworn officers dedicated to Orinda. Given the widespread challenge posed by rising public agency pension costs statewide, Keeter said she expected some sort of pension reform measure to be placed before voters in November.

Orinda's current cost per resident for police services, a budgeted cost of \$212 annually, falls in the mid-range as compared to other local communities according to the Matrix report. Compared to its neighbors, Orinda is on the high end. In Lafayette, which also contracts with the CCCSO but has a larger population, the annual per resident cost for police services is \$158. In Moraga, which has its own police department and a similar number of residents, police services cost about \$137 a head.

Matrix evaluated the cost of Orinda maintaining its contract with CCCSO over the next five years as compared to five alternative police services delivery options. With the rising costs of the County's retirement benefit structure, Matrix concluded that staying with the CCCSO might not be economically viable for the City. Matrix recommended that Orinda further explore the formation of an Orinda Police Department or a partnership with Lafayette and/or Moraga. Projected cost estimates for these alternatives were lower than maintaining the CCCSO contract, however, the creation of a new police department in Orinda or in combination with another municipality would include a number of start-up costs as well.

The City Council has planned a follow up workshop to further discuss the police services study on February 3rd at 6:00 p.m.

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