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Keeping it Clean and Bright-Who Pays?

By Andrea A. Firth

Continuing to subsidize the lighting, landscaping, and clean up of Orinda's downtown districts with money from the City's dwindling General Fund was a topic of discussion during the two City Council meetings in May. Assessments levied on the property owners generate less than one third of the \$100,000 plus cost associated with this lighting and landscaping district. The City will contribute over \$48,000 next year to maintain the street lighting, litter pick-up, and landscape maintenance (including water and electrical for irrigation) around the commercial properties in the Village and Crossroads sections of the City. While a storm water utility assessment fund will contribute about \$25,000 to cover street sweeping, the City is faced with making up the difference for the remainder of the lighting and clean up and has been doing so for several years.

According to City Manager Janet Keeter, the Parks and Recreation budget for landscaping and maintenance, which includes maintaining the downtown district, has already been reduced by 25% through a reduction in services. The Council explored ways to further reduce costs while keeping the trash and weeds under control, but both Chuck Swanson, the Director of Public Works and Engineering Services, and Todd Skinner, the Director of Parks and Recreation, explained that there was little left to cut without feeling the impact on the look and feel of downtown. In contrast to the two residential lighting/landscaping zones, whose residents voted in 1999 to increase their assessment and include an annual cost of living adjustment, the property owners in the commercial districts did not approve the assessment increases.

Council directed staff to start a dialogue with the commercial property owners regarding the revenue issue related to the lighting and landscape services. Keeter stated that in informal discussions with Chamber representatives, they indicated that they were not supportive of an increase in the assessment at this time due to the current status of the economy, but she acknowledged that most of the business owners in the downtown districts were not the property owners responsible for the assessment. She added that the timeframe to complete the steps necessary to prepare a ballot for a vote of the property owners to adjust their assessment was too short for this year. Several Council members encouraged staff to get the process going for next year. "The education process can start now," stated Councilmember Steve Glazer.

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