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More Streetscape Issues for East End

By Cathy Tyson

The islands are shrinking, not due to climate change, but because of public feedback. After a productive special workshop that gathered input on the proposed east end medians a few weeks ago, the Lafayette City Council recently discussed the new revised median layout that incorporated suggested changes. Council members were surprised at the degree of consensus among residents and business owners for the center section of Mt. Diablo Boulevard from First Street to Brown Avenue. The new plan shrunk some of the proposed medians and eliminated one particularly troublesome island.

With input from the East End Coalition, merchants came together and were able to consolidate a wish list for medians that would beautify the street, but also make for convenient access to the businesses along both sides. Changes unanimously agreed upon by city council members include shortening the east end of the median in front of Sterling Cleaners and other adjustments. Staff was directed to proceed with final construction documents for pedestrian, bike and streetscape improvements.

While the plans for medians in the middle of the street were mostly finalized, there was plenty of controversy about property owners' frontage on Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Some establishments, like Boswell's, pre-date city incorporation; the city has little leverage to encourage changes on those parcels. In addition, vintage sidewalks on the east end have seen better days. One longtime resident complained that while it's the property owner's responsibility to maintain the sidewalk, at this point they are ready for replacement. In her opinion, that should be the responsibility of the city.

Part of the problem is the "appearance of inequity" said city manager Steven Falk. "As we learned with the median islands, it's always better to be inclusive."

Historically, it has been the property owner's responsibility to maintain landscaping to the curb. If some new standards are eventually adopted, one of the biggest challenges will be installing irrigation, said Tony Coe, engineering services manager. Newer buildings have, as a condition of approval, requirements to plant and maintain a landscaped frontage. Currently the city maintains landscaping that was installed with public money, more commonly found on the west end of Lafayette.

Near the end of a very lengthy meeting the public works subcommittee, composed of council members Mark Mitchell and Brandt Andersson, was directed to work with city staff to lay out a proposed structure and return to the city council in late July with a schedule for community workshops involving the business and property owners in the downtown core area which stretches from Oakwood Athletic Club to the Lafayette Park Hotel.

A couple of preliminary options include the possibility of property owners' contracting as a group with the city for maintenance, or contracting with an outside landscape firm for upkeep.

A Core Area Assessment District is already in place, "so there is funding," said Mayor Mike Anderson, "but not enough to do all the things that we'd like to do." The council wants to make clear that the obligation to landscape to the curb has always existed but the city has, out of the goodness of its heart, helped out with some maintenance in the past. "You've been sleeping and now we're going to wake you up," said Anderson.

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[back](#)

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