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Mayor reviews challenging year, looks ahead to reopening

By Pippa Fisher

Lafayette Mayor Susan Candell covered five themes during her first State of the City Address, much of it optimistic even following what she referred to as a challenging year; one she said compelled city leaders and community alike to take actions of restoration, recovery and resiliency.

It was certainly a very different format for the mayor's State of the City Address this year - the first time it has ever been held virtually, and, said Candell, hopefully the very last time. But, as Candell later reflected, using a virtual platform for city meetings has had the effect of actually increasing public participation, and no doubt her message will reach a bigger audience this year as people joined in from home and still others will view the recording.

The Feb. 11 meeting took an expanded format virtually this year, with musical entertainment provided by Scott Lindorfer and Rachel Dunzweiler. And this year all the city government heads of departments gave brief updates. The meeting was co-hosted by the Chamber of Commerce, and this year for the first time featured an opportunity for Q&A.

Candell expressed pride in the city staff and for what has been done to address the pandemic, noting that the initial decision to cut \$1 million from each department, and instigate a hiring freeze in anticipation of a shortfall, has left the city budget remaining solid and without the need to tap into reserves.

The mayor reported that the city's Business Assistance Program set up last year and overseen by Townsend Public Affairs staff, had now helped local businesses and nonprofits navigate the rounds of federal stimulus packages, to the tune of almost \$1.8 million, and she was looking forward to another possible package in March.

Candell also expressed pride in the city's dialogue on policing and efforts toward achieving a more diverse, equitable and inclusive Lafayette, pointing to the formation of the Equity and Inclusion Task Force with its three-prong approach, working together with schools, and the Public Safety Task Force. She noted progress being made by City Manager Niroop Srivatsa and others working on the formation of a Community Behavior Crisis Response Team in a partnership between cities and the county, in order to provide a team of experts to handle de-escalation in mental health crises.

Candell gave a quick update too on the ongoing protests on the El Curtola overpass, which she described as "the issue that keeps me up at night," (see related story page A3) before moving onto a report on the city's General Plan update, currently underway.

Noting that Lafayette's Regional housing Needs Allocation has most recently been put at 2,100 housing units to be built between 2023 and 2031 - a 20% increase with 60% of those affordable - Candell questioned whether allocations made pre-COVID should still be applicable. The city is studying, she said, where it could rezone to accommodate the housing, for example along Deer Hill Road, and she said she is closely watching the progress of bills such as SB9, and SB10, both of which would allow more units on currently-zoned single family lots.

Candell said that the topic is hot and challenging in all directions. "My personal belief," she said, "is that Lafayette deserves the correct allocation from our state. We should pursue finding the truth and we must hold our state officials accountable for producing accurate results based on reality." The mayor encouraged everyone to become informed on the topic and to give input to the General Plan Advisory Committee.

Looking ahead, Candell said she is hoping to hear ideas on reopening the city for discussion at the annual Tri-Cities Meeting in March.

With hopes that by next year she would be enjoying the event in person with her fellow council members, Candell brought her remarks to an end.

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