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Orinda wins grant to install solar panels, battery storage at community center

By Sora O'Doherty

The city of Orinda has won a very large grant and the city council has unanimously approved the installation of a new system of solar panels and a battery backup for the community center. One of three scenarios offered to the council, the adopted scenario, which was recommended by staff, also keeps the existing generator in place for use when peak usage must be provided. The main purpose of the system is to assure access to power for residents during public safety power shutoffs, during which the city opens the community center to allow residents to access power.

The total cost of the system will be \$317,551, of which \$217,551 is from a state grant and \$100,000 will come from general capital project funds. The staff report was introduced Feb. 2 by Larry Theis, Assistant City Manager/Director of Public Works, and was prepared by Senior Engineer Siva Natarajan. Currently the energy costs for the community center are \$20,000 per year. With the new system it is estimated that the city can save \$133,000 over the next 20 years. Staff also looked at the possibility of installing solar panels on the library, and recommend that it be considered as part of future updates to the library. Solar power could offset about 33% of the energy the building requires.

The staff report pointed to the advantages and disadvantages of the scheme. Due to the availability of both solar and fossil fuel systems, there is minimum to no potential for exceeding the generation capacities.

There will be redundant power available even during inclement weather conditions when there is a potential for the solar system to not generate enough power to replenish the battery. Integrating the existing diesel generator will eliminate the lack of reliability compared to a purely solar system, without adding additional costs to the project. Although the option adopted is the lowest cost option, it does have the disadvantages of being partially dependent on fossil fuel.

The plan adopted also provides for the installation of a Tesla power wall battery storage for backup power. Council Member Inga Miller thanked Theis and Natarajan for what she called a phenomenal staff report and presentation. She said it was an example of the discretion that staff uses in only applying for grants the City is likely to get. "Of course," she added, "I want to go with something totally green, but at the end of the day, the best choice is to follow the staff's recommendation." She acknowledged that the scheme is "not the most green, but fits the budget and makes our residents safest during PSPSs because we have the backup generator."

Vice Mayor Dennis Fay agreed that it was the sensible approach. While delighted that the city got a grant and can move forward, Fay wondered if the system is flexible enough to allow the city to avail of better batteries that might be developed in the future. Natarajan assured him that it is. Mayor Amy Worth noted that the grant was very competitive, and Orinda was very fortunate to have received it.

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