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Orindans Say No Tax for New Roads

By Andrea A. Firth

A convincing majority of Orinda voters believe that the City's road conditions are among the worst in the Bay Area and that the aged storm drain system is simultaneously collapsing beneath the roads. However, a much less convincing number of voters support new taxes to fix the City's infrastructure problems.

At their February 2nd meeting, the City Council reviewed the results of a public opinion poll of 400 residents who were surveyed to assess their support of ballot measures to finance infrastructure improvements. Although 52% of those polled would likely support an infrastructure bond, the positive responses fell far short of the 2/3 super-majority required to carry the measure. "Given the financial situation of our community, the general obligation bond is not an option," stated Council Member Steve Glazer who noted that polling numbers were higher when the City previously placed infrastructure bond measures on the ballot. In addition, Orindans were starkly opposed to the idea of a \$300 parcel tax to fund road and storm drain repairs with 60% of those surveyed rejecting this approach.

In fact there was no funding mechanism or tax that seemed sufficiently palatable to the residents surveyed to support even a simple majority for an infrastructure measure. Increasing the real property transfer tax, increasing the local sales tax, and establishing a utility users tax-all measures that require a simple majority for approval-looked unlikely to pass if presented to voters. Slightly less than 50% of surveyed voters supported increasing the real property transfer tax. [This tax would also necessitate that Orinda switch from a general law to an independent charter city, which is an option the City Council has begun to weigh. Lafayette recently polled residents regarding their support of the charter city move, and Orinda's Council plans to look to those results for guidance.] Forty-six percent of those surveyed agreed with increasing the local sales tax by 1/4 cent to support infrastructure.

Establishing a utility usage tax on water, gas, electric, cable, and phone service was the toughest sell with only 24% of respondents supporting the concept.

With declining revenues and a projected deficit for the upcoming budget year, the poll also asked residents about their support of new taxes to fund city services. Over half, 52% of those polled, would support a \$53 annual parcel tax for this use, but again this was far short of the required 2/3 majority needed to carry the measure. The 1/4 cent sales tax, which needs a simple majority to pass, garnered the support of 53% of residents polled. At current sales levels this tax increase would yield \$370,000 annually; while it would have minimal impact on the City's multi-million dollar infrastructure problem, the Council did feel this could help bridge the City budget's revenue gap. However, Council member Glazer voiced concern that with the margin presented it would take a big effort to push the 1/4 cent sales tax through. "I guess my concern is having someone willing to step forward to run a campaign [for the sales tax]," added Vice Mayor Victoria Smith noting that she did not see any obvious interest group to take charge.

Regarding the public's satisfaction with how the City is doing its job, the poll results were more positive. Seventy eight percent of those polled felt the City was doing an average or better job at taking care of business and providing basic services. The Library, the Orinda Union School District (K through 8th grade), and the police department all received approval ratings of 80% or more, and 70% of respondents approved of the Moraga Orinda Fire District's performance. The City Council held its own with 60% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreeing of their performance, which was a 4% bump over poll results from 2008.

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