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Moraga to Poll Residents

By *Sophie Braccini*

Faced with the task of finding twenty four million dollars to fix its roads, the Town of Moraga has decided it has no choice but to ask its residents to pitch in.

The condition of Moraga's roads has been ranked in the lower 15% of the entire Bay Area, and to postpone repairs means the cost will grow exponentially. The Town's objective is to put a revenue measure on the ballot this November. The question is, what measure and for how much? After a discussion on February 22, the Town Council narrowed the possibilities to three and will have a consultant poll residents to find the sweet spot that will garner enough support.

In her report to the Council, Town Manager Jill Keimach presented the result of over a year's worth of effort to study neighborhood streets, the reasons for their failure, the different ways to fix the problems, and how much it will cost to remedy them in the long term. "Town staff researched alternative treatments being used by many other cities to reduce the overall costs of the program while retaining effectiveness," she said. "Based on this, as well as a peer review by the City Engineer from the City of El Cerrito, the total needed to repair the neighborhood roads is estimated to be \$25 million."

El Cerrito was often cited as an example of a city that was able to restore its infrastructure from a failed level to good within a few years. Jerry Bradshaw, the City of El Cerrito's Engineer, has been retained by the Town of Moraga on a part time contract to help out, since Moraga's former Town Engineer resigned last month. Bradshaw was at the meeting and explained that El Cerrito was able to secure enough financing from its residents through the approval of a half of one percent increase in sales tax.

In Moraga, such a measure would generate about \$300,000 a year, enough to help to maintain good roads, but not enough to erase the backlog of deferred maintenance.

"We have to also talk about the maintenance (after the roads have been repaired)," said Mayor Mike Metcalf. Staff worked on different scenarios (see graph) charted out over a 20-year period for the upkeep of the renovated infrastructure. "We need \$25 million now, then various amounts of money to preserve these roads for the next 20 years, that can range up to a total of \$42 million" said Council Member Dave Trotter. "We need a measure that would bond for a larger amount upfront than something else that would provide for continuing maintenance."

The poll will be conducted in late spring or early summer. The Lew Edwards Group will design the survey to test the response of the community to three potential revenue measures at different levels.

Residents interested in hosting informational sessions in their homes for their friends and neighbors should contact Town Clerk Marty McInturf at 888-7022.

Here are the three revenue measures under consideration:

Mello-Roos Community Facilities District (a "CFD") is a Special Tax. Once approved, a Special Tax Lien is placed against each property in the CFD. Property owners then pay a Special Tax each year. If the project cost is high, municipal bonds will be sold by the CFD to provide the large amount of money initially needed to build the improvements or fund the services. By law (Prop. 13), the Special Tax cannot be directly based on the value of the property. Special Taxes instead are based on mathematical formulas that take into account property characteristics such as use of the property, square footage of the structure and lot size. The formula is defined at the time of formation, and would include a maximum special tax amount and a percentage maximum annual increase. Staff believes that the flexibility in designing the formula permits fairness (such as taking into account residents who live on private roads). Needs a two-thirds majority approval to pass.

Ad Valorem Property Tax is a tax calculated by allocating bond debt service to all taxable parcels in proportion to their assessed value determined by the County. The annual amount is deductible on individual income tax returns under current law. Needs a two-thirds majority approval to pass.

General Purpose Sales Tax would be a half percent or one percent added sales tax on any purchase within the Town's borders. According to Jerry Bradshaw the passage of such a measure in El Cerrito did not result in any sales loss. Only 60% of the revenue may be used to service the debt of a bond. It captures non-Moraga drivers coming to the discount stores, and would generate road repair funds in an amount ranging from \$300,000 to \$600,000 (1% increase) a year. Needs only a simple majority approval to pass.

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