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Town Faces Delays in Sinkhole Repair

By Sophie Braccini

Protecting the sinkhole site during winter and waiting for next year to start the repairs is an increasingly likely scenario for Moraga.

As new administrative requirements are imposed upon the town by Caltrans, the deadline to award a repair contract in time to complete the work before the rainy season has become an ever more elusive target. Fortunately, town staff has prepared a winterization plan.

During an additional council meeting on Aug. 10, public works director Edric Kwan recounted that a few days prior Caltrans had added a new administrative requirement. As the town repairs the sinkhole, it has to take into account the infrastructure that utility agencies such as PG&E or EBMUD had running through the hole that formed last March. The town has to "protect in place" this infrastructure as it repairs the underlying cause for the hole: the 90-foot culvert that failed. Now and for the first time, Caltrans is requiring Moraga to bill the agencies to protect in place and sign with them agreements.

"The Feds are interested in recouping any funds," says Kwan, "especially with the utility."

Caltrans is managing the federal aid that is given to the town. Moraga cannot proceed with repairs until it gets all the approval required if it wants to be reimbursed.

Kwan said that Caltrans had known since the beginning that utility companies were involved in the situation and were going to be protected in place, but that until Tuesday, Aug. 9, had not informed town staff of the requirement to sign utility agreements.

"Unfortunately that will take time," said Kwan, as utilities have to go to their respective boards for approval of the agreements.

Kwan reminded the council the repair contracts had to be awarded by Aug. 24 in order to have time to repair the culvert before the rainy season. He added that the alternative is for the council to approve a contract to just protect the site for the rainy season at their Sept. 14 meeting.

Kwan does not want the town to suffer financially from the delay and is working with Caltrans to have federal funding cover the entirety of the winterization cost. When federal funds were approved for the town of Moraga, the rule was that the emergency repairs that were conducted at the time of the incident, last March, would be completely reimbursed to the town, while the rehabilitation of the intersection would require the town to come up with matching funds at 11.47 percent. The town has 180 days to do work that can be considered an emergency. Kwan is looking for contractors able to grout the offsets and the cracks of the culvert quickly, before Sept. 8. The estimated cost of the winterization of the hole and culvert is between \$150,000 and \$200,000.

Kwan said he believes that real repairs will not be able to be started before next year, but he reassured the council that the two lanes currently opened would remain accessible to drivers over the winter.

Mayor Mike Metcalf noted that the town needs the cooperation of Caltrans. Kwan confirmed that Caltrans has worked expeditiously with the town and that getting this far within a month (since the town was approved for federal reimbursement) was quite a feat. He added that it is not uncommon for a project such as this one to take two years to be completed.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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