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City Council likes its priorities, but private road dwellers object

By Sora O'Doherty

There was a lot of excitement in the Library Auditorium Feb. 19 as the Orinda City Council discussed its priorities for the next two years, with downtown development and daylighting of San Pablo Creek among its top priorities. Those projects did receive enthusiastic support from speakers and the council. But excitement turned to emotional dismay when some of Orinda's residents once again asked the city to make solving the problem of Orinda's private streets its top priority.

During the council discussion on whether the council should agree to some forum for the discussion of the private roads issue, Mayor Inga Miller was clearly upset as she proclaimed that "we're very strongly making a choice that we're going to do this (look into private roads) instead of working on the downtown, and this is an incredible disappointment to me." Other council members quickly reassured her that they were not choosing private roads over downtown development.

Last year the council had shocked private road residents when it rolled back the idea, supported by the Citizen's Infrastructure Oversight Committee, of forming a task force to look into the issue of private roads. Residents of private roads claim that 20 percent of the population of Orinda reside on private roads and have long been asking for a forum where ideas about addressing how private roads might be incorporated into the city could be discussed without the three-minute time limitation imposed at city council meetings. Since then, two new members have joined the city council, and they seem to be interested in hearing more on the subject. Vice Mayor Darlene Gee has been consistently sympathetic to the difficulties faced by private road residents. "I believe there is more community support for this than we might believe," she said, while assuring the mayor that she in no way intended to put private roads ahead of downtown development. Council Member Dennis Fay stated that he is also concerned about drainage. "When I walked the city campaigning," he said, "there were places where city water dumped into private drains." Gee said that she was impressed by a candidate at the interviews for committees and commissions who said, "At the end of the day, we have to decide whether we are a community together or not." The mayor pointed out that the person who said that resides on a private road. Miller also repeatedly stated that the private road residents would no longer wish their streets to become public because that would mean the installation of 5G communications sites in the public right of way.

Staff, in presenting the list of potential priorities to the council, was particularly interested if there were any that the council wanted to add or remove. It seemed that the majority of the council agreed that updating the pedestrian walkways and bicycle plans could be delayed.

The list of priority projects was broken up into four large categories: infrastructure, downtown, emergency preparedness and fiscal stability. Specific projects were then further categorized as city buildings and facilities, park improvements, transportation/drainage, and vehicles. The latter had just one proposed project: the replacement of the city's fleet of vehicles.

Council Member Amy Worth emphasized that the city needs to look at the completion of the public roads restoration project, as well as seeking a long-term funding source for maintenance of those roads. "We'll need to go back to the voters for public roads and drains," she said. "We have very limited funds," she added, noting that she didn't know what voter tolerance would be for additional taxes. The subject of raising additional funds to complete the projects of restoring the cities arterial and feeder streets as well as public drains was discussed in light of the coming conclusion of the half-cent sales tax. Any revenue raising legislation requires a two-thirds majority vote of the public, and private road residents have been suggesting that that threshold might be difficult to achieve without their support. The council will have to decide if it wants to seek another sales tax in an amount of one-half cent or greater, and what, if anything, the proceeds of such a tax could be used for.

Gee concluded by thanking both staff and the public for their presentations. "If we had all of the resources, we'd want to do everything in here," she said. She did suggest two additional items she would like to see adopted: a grant consultant to help the city find more money and a public information consultant. "We've made consistent improvement over the past five years," she noted, "but I think we need to uptick (communications because) we have a very sophisticated community."

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