

Measure R – Letters to the Editor

Opposing

Problems with Proposed Tax (Orinda News, September 2020)

Regarding the possibility of a new one percent sales tax on our November ballot, there are several problems that make such a tax very questionable at this time.

The proposal is to have the tax in place for 20 years; the expected revenues amount to approximately \$2.4 million annually, for a total of \$48 million, or **\$63 million over 20 years** if adjusted for 3 percent inflation.

At the June 30 City Council meeting, however, **only \$3 million of these revenues were allocated to fire prevention**, which most Orindans feel is the city's most pressing need; public storm drains will receive \$10 million.

That leaves \$35 million "to be determined." The city has expressed a desire to use revenues for infrastructure, such as road maintenance. Once again, such maintenance would benefit 80 percent of the city on public residential roads and leave out the 20 percent on private residential roads, even though all residents would be paying this tax (\$7,000 per household over 20 years).

Most of our private roads are private only because the city requires them to be. Additionally, the present sales tax (expiring in 2023) and the road bond issue (expiring in 2037) will have cost private road residents \$12,000 per household.

Importantly, a general sales tax doesn't require the city to dedicate revenues to any specific use, which means the city can at any time change its mind.

A safer way to fund fire prevention is not to rely on a general sales tax that might or might not fund it. We need a small fire prevention parcel tax (\$100 annually?) for a few (not 20) years.

Finally, the city must recognize the inequity of a general tax on all residents when it specifically eliminates 20 percent of its citizens from receiving the same benefits that 80 percent will enjoy.

Kathleen Finch

Not Time to Raise Sales Tax (Orinda News, September 2020)

There is a time and a place to raise tax revenue for community needs. Orinda needs public works and appropriate funding, but the present proposals by the City Council are in no way sufficiently well designed. The proposed 20-year one cent sales tax must be rejected so that the community can take the time to reach agreement on how to adequately address the specific needs of Orinda.

Our biggest issues are fire prevention, drainage and road repair. **The tax proposal as set forth by the council is open-ended spending for 20 years. It has no honest provision to adequately provide improvements in fire protection**, no reasonable provisions for critical

drainage repair, and no road repair options for the 20% of Orinda's residents on privately maintained roads, who are denied the opportunity to join the Orinda road public system.

As a community, we have the need to join together in our mutual needs to support public works. There is no question that in time, Orinda's citizens can forge an effective plan that will benefit all of us both adequately and fairly. So, I appeal to all voters to **turn down this tax as proposed** and start over.

Bill Abriel

Orinda's Proposed Sales Tax is the Wrong Tax at the Wrong Time (Orinda News, October 2020)

Why?

Orinda needs to fund fire prevention, because MOFD refuses to do so even though we are paying it millions more than it costs them to provide us with the service we do receive. But, a 20-year, one-percent sales tax is the wrong tax.

Out of the \$2.4 million a year the tax will generate (at a cost of \$9,000 per household over 20 years including inflation), **the city "plans" on spending only \$500-750,000 per year on fire prevention, and this is for only 3-4 years.** Then, supposedly the "job" will be done and the city can reduce the spending to maintenance only. **Who came up with this "plan"? Is there any science behind it? Has anyone seen the plan?** If history tells a story, in the 29 years since the Oakland Hills firestorm the city has spent virtually nothing, nor demanded that MOFD spend our tax dollars, on fire prevention. Right now the current sales tax generates \$100,000 a month. What is being spent on fire prevention?

Alternatively, a \$150 a year parcel tax would generate over \$1 million per year and legally require the city to spend it on fire prevention services. It could be for a limited five years to see how the city performs this new service. This tax could be put on the ballot as early as March. In the February survey, 86% said fire prevention was their greatest concerns before the current fires filled the air with smoke. Since 2012, all four of the city's tax proposals passed with over two thirds majorities.

This tax is essentially a road and storm drain maintenance tax with a little fire prevention thrown in. But there are huge questions on what we should really spend to protect ourselves from a devastating wildfire and which roads and drains shall and should get fixed.

A \$60 million, 20-year general tax is the wrong tax.

And now, in the midst of the worst pandemic in a century, with its unknown economic impacts, it is not the time to implement a 20-year, \$60 million tax. For the next two years the city has over \$3 million at its disposal, even without a parcel tax, for fire prevention and road maintenance. Now is the wrong time to commit to this additional huge new tax.

Steve Cohn

To Melanie Light, Safer Orinda and FireWise Group Members (Orinda News, October 2020)

I, as much as you, know that Orinda is a high fire risk area and that we need to reduce our fuel load. I completely agree with your objective. I need to warn you that our city council misleads and manipulates us, the voters.

The council misrepresents their intentions, to get more money into the city coffers. Subsequently, it becomes “their” money. It is only because most (86%) Orindans expressed their fear of wildfires that the tax is being promoted as a fire prevention tax. **If our council was honest, they would state how much will be spent on excess fuel reduction.** They should also state that this sum does not fund the removal of large trees. I predict that you will be disappointed with the future council decisions. Please do not trust them. No matter what they tell you in private conversations.

The only way to control this is by a tax or bond that legally binds the city to spend the funds for one purpose. The proposed measure R does not do this. You should fear, not only fire, but the integrity of our council. Internal documents exist which allocate these funds, but are not made public. One such detailed (and revealing) document was pulled from the city website because “it was premature.” All that is left is a general “needs assessment” document.

Please verify the “facts” that they tell you. It is not true that the gift of public funds precludes helping private roads. The City of Orinda already does this (by contract) and other cities pay 25% to maintain all private roads. The city attorney has said these contracts and policies are legal. Orinda has not allowed any private road to become public since incorporation. Beware of what they do not tell you.

Dear Safer Orinda and FireWise people, please be careful. You are being used as a pawn in a game by expert manipulators, who will take your money but not listen to your pleas. **Think carefully about whether you should give them a dollar in order to get a few cents worth of fuel reduction.**

I will vote against Measure R, hoping to get a dedicated source of money for fuel reduction in early 2021. The current tax continues till 2023 and the city can manage with the funds it already collects for now.

Charles Porges

In Favor

John Wyro (Orinda News, October 2020)

Director of MOFD for 17 years

Why city involvement in fire prevention when we have a fire department? There has always been a cooperative effort between the city and MOFD to address the shared concern for fire prevention. **(The City and MOFD have not spoken with each other for 25 years until the last year. The only thing MOFD did with regards fire prevention while John Wyro was on the board was the annual “weed abatement” program, which is as effective a wildfire deterrent as a plastic tarp is a roof covering, and plan checks to try to make new homes and remodels code compliant, a service they charged for and probably was a profit center. MOFD was formed to use Orinda tax dollars in Orinda. While John Wyro was representing “Orinda’s best interests”, 20 million Orinda tax dollars were used for service to Moraga. This is the perfect example of a public official spinning a yarn that has no basis of fact and why the voters should not have trusted Orinda with Measure R tax dollars with no plan nor guarantees of usage.)**

Jud Hammon (Orinda News, October 2020)

Passage of this measure will provide Orinda an estimated \$2.4 million per year, a resource the city needs to significantly reduce the city's risk of catastrophic damage due to wildfires and flooding, and to protect the recent investments made in our roads. (Jud Hammon was chair of the CIOC, the Citizens Infrastructure Oversight Commission. The CIOC knew nothing about wildfire prevention, only infrastructure, roads and storm drains. At their July 2020 meeting they were presented with a pro-forma Measure R spending plan by the Director of Public Works showing that over the 20 year term of Measure R, only 15% would be used for wildfire prevention; 75% for infrastructure.)

Maggie Reeves (Orinda News, October 2020)

I support this measure because of how Orinda plans to spend this money: dedicated to fire prevention and mitigation. (Maggie is a citizen of Orinda. She believes what the City tells her with no facts to back up the belief.)

Linda Landau (Orinda News, October 2020)

We have a chance to make serious progress on the vegetative fuel load that has been planted in Orinda since the 1940s, when it was grass and native oak trees. The city council has stated that the first years of the tax will be used primarily to tackle the long-overdue project of removing brush. (Linda had been an active citizen in Orinda for decades. She wants to believe that the City Council will spend Measure R money on wildfire prevention. She will end up being disappointed when after 15 months of the program, when \$4.5 million has been collected, only \$600,000 has been spent on wildfire prevention and the City allocates \$2.4 million for road maintenance.)

Elisabeth Jewel (Orinda News, October 2020)

I will never forget frantically packing the car with my one-year-old and a diaper bag to flee the approaching flames of the Oakland fire in 1991... Efforts need to be greatly expanded to make a substantial dent in fuel reduction. Dead trees and branches need to be removed before they potentially block major escape routes. The city has pledged that a majority of the funds from Measure R will go to fire prevention. (In November 2022, two years after Measure R was approved by the voters, \$400,000 was allocated for \$600 grants to homeowners living on major evacuation routes to clear city property of excess vegetation. The city will not clear its own property, only allocate \$600 per property so the residents fronting the road can do the work. It took two years to put this program in place. This program increased the total spending on wildfire prevention since the tax started (generating \$5 million in revenue) to \$1 million, while \$2.4 million has been spend on road maintenance. Does Elisabeth feel like she's been fed a bait-and-switch? Is Elisabeth even aware of how her sales tax dollars are being spent?)

There were many others in support, all believing the Measure R money would be spent for wildfire prevention while the City had no intention of spending it that way.