

Measure G and the Many Ambiguities!

“Neighborhood Speak”-----by Steve Patterson—Federation of SR Neighborhoods

On Tues November 3rd Measure G failed to get the 2/3 vote to pass the \$88 million dollar bond measure. And while supporters feel somewhat victorious at getting 61% support by voters, the prognosis for future passage looks grim. This was a low-turnout election and certainly supporters stepped up and voted for G. But in the future, there will likely be other competing tax ballot measures, so the opposition will likely grow as will the general feeling that people are being taxed to death. Since the economy seems like it could be mired in the doldrums for a number of years, people will not feel flush with generosity.

The real issue regarding the critical facilities is less about seismic problems but more about functional obsolescence and the inability of these facilities to support modern technological public safety operations. However, functional obsolescence as a theme does not resonate with voters so the seismic issue got showcased. Yes, a few of the facilities have major seismic issues, but not all of them. Minor retrofits would likely be adequate fixes.

There have been no new firehouses built in San Rafael in 50 years and the firehouses that exist came about as San Rafael grew in size. There was no grand strategic model for locations and firehouse placement. So given that firefighting has changed over the last 50-75 years and what fire depts. do is deliver paramedic service, do we even need the same number/size of firehouses in the same places? So might this bond measure be an opportunity to scale back and address “what is” rather than “what was”.

The Critical Facilities Committee in their assessment of the financing options unanimously agreed that a “sinking fund” should be established to avoid this financial shortfall in the future—40-50 years from now. But the general obligation bond that was then decided upon had no such provision for setting aside money for the future. So 40 to 50 years into the future this problem would resurface and residents would need to go through this, all over again.

We live in the richest county in the country. Why some of that wealth couldn't be tapped with the creation of private/public partnerships. This might take the form of “naming rights” similar to what the Rafael Theatre did or what many educational institutions do when they want to build a new centerpiece building. They sell off the naming rights to rooms, hallways, entrances, etc and create a private funding source mechanism that can raise all or a portion of the money needed. While discussed very early on, it got dismissed by benign neglect by the committee.

Does the city need to OWN its facilities and might it LEASE facilities as a different option? For example, the San Rafael Corporate Center has one remaining building left to build, might that be an opportunity to have something built to city specifications in exchange for a long term lease. That location could be ideal for a City Hall/Police Dept and the developers would have an instant building filled with tenants. The city could then sell off its current city hall location and generate the cash flow to pay rent for an extended period and never reach into the pockets of taxpayers.

Prop. 13 inequities also fed some of the opposition to Measure G. When your old-time neighbors pay 20% of what you pay for property taxes because they have lived in their house for 35 years and its assessment is dramatically lower, the impacts on Measure G just further exacerbates those inequities. I am aware of people who opposed this bond measure for reasons of inequity.

At the end of the recent 18 month process, the city brought in a group of consultants (TRAMUTOLA, LLC) to poll residents as to their tolerance for added taxes and their receptivity to an array of options to fix the facilities. In the opinion of many, they hijacked the process from the critical facilities committee (volunteer citizens) and began to advance what they felt would be successful with voters, both the scale and financial tools. Some felt that maybe the citizens committee was never really needed and that the city and the consultants could have come up with the same result. Several committee members have reminded me that this citizen committee served as advocates for measure G and provided the sweat equity needed for a ballot measure and campaign.

And even in these tight economic times most other tax ballot measures requiring two thirds approval for other towns and cities in Marin, passed. So clearly SR voters saw problems with the scale, scope, and unanswered questions that never were clearly addressed in the campaign to pass Measure G. And while there was no organized opposition and it still lost. If the City attempts to try any similar measure again, I suspect there will be some type of organized opposition and things won't seem quite so serene.

Most importantly for the future, there needs to be some evidence that the City has tapped other funding sources and created some type of external funding source so that the financial burden is being shared and not exclusively borne by the taxpaying public.

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