

Community News

Atherton City Council likely to seek repeal of Measure L

Private donations haven't brought in enough money; other ways must be found, says mayor



Atherton Mayor Michael Lempres during a joint meeting of the Atherton City Council and the Menlo Park Fire Protection District board in Holbrook-Palmer Park on Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016. (John Orr / Daily News)

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The Atherton City Council has plenty of work ahead in 2017, starting with a combined study and action session on Jan. 18.

That meeting, starting at 5:30 p.m. with the study session, and continuing with the action session at 7 p.m., will be the only full meeting of the council in January.

One item, according to Mayor Michael Lempres, will be to “begin discussion on Measure L.”

That measure, passed by 73 percent of Atherton voters in 2012, is the one that requires that the town use “funds primarily from private donations to construct a new Town Center.” It also states that general fund or parcel tax money may not be used for the project.

After years of planning a replacement for the old and decrepit buildings that house the town’s administration, police and planning departments, and years of trying to raise funds, it’s become clear that private donors are not going to come through with enough money for the job.

“We’ll talk about alternative funding mechanisms for the civic center,” said Lempres during a recent phone call. “Here’s what we have from Atherton Now (the committee tasked with raising the donations), here’s what remains.”

Atherton Now has raised about \$6 million so far, enough to get the planning completed and then some, and the town has about \$2 million from other funds saved, but another \$10 million to \$15 million is still needed.

“There are three or four methods, paths, for funding,” Lempres said. “We’ll begin to talk about the options, and set direction for staff, decide on the language for a ballot measure to repeal Measure L.”

And, Lempres pointed out, “We don’t have much time. We’ll likely want to put it on the June ballot, which means we have to get the exact language for it set by council, probably by February.”

Another issue facing Atherton this year, Lempres said, is finding a new police chief.

Atherton Police Cmdr. Joe Wade has served as acting chief since Ed Flint’s retirement in October.

The recruitment process has started, and a posting is being

developed, said Lempres.

Wade has been a popular acting chief, but Lempres said he didn't know if Wade would apply for the job.

"It's the most common thing people want to talk about at a dinner party or whatever," said Lempres. "It's almost all positive.

"The department has a vast clearance rate (for solving crimes) and it's high on service. They do vacation watches, use dogs and other tools to check properties."

In fact, one of the department's police dogs, Karli, who retired in December, is slated to get a commendation from the council on Wednesday.

Other issues facing Atherton this year include:

- Finding a way to get a quad gate at the Watkins Avenue crossing of Caltrain tracks, which would allow the town to extend its quiet zone, which would cut down on train horn noise;
- Dealing with an expected influx of noise complaints now that Surf Air has resumed using an approach to San Carlos Airport that goes directly over Atherton homes;
- Finding a way to communicate better with surrounding cities about their development plans — "We need a better way to get aware of them, so we can mitigate their effects";
- Discussing the "grand boulevard" idea, which could take various forms, including traffic calming and safety improvements, for El Camino Real with Redwood City and Menlo Park.

And, Lempres said, the town wants to continue talking with other agencies and municipalities to find a way to deal with traffic through the town, which is a forest dream part of the day and a traffic nightmare at other times.

But don't expect to see Marsh Road be widened, as Menlo Park Fire Protection District Chief Harold Schapelhouman has suggested.

“We have no interest in expanding Marsh Road,” Lempres said. “To the extent that people look at that as a solution, they should look at something else.”

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John Orr John Orr edits and writes for Daily News feature pages, including arts and entertainment. He also reports on the Town of Atherton and some other cities. Previously, he was mysteries and thrillers books columnist for the Mercury News, and also wrote about movies and blues music.

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