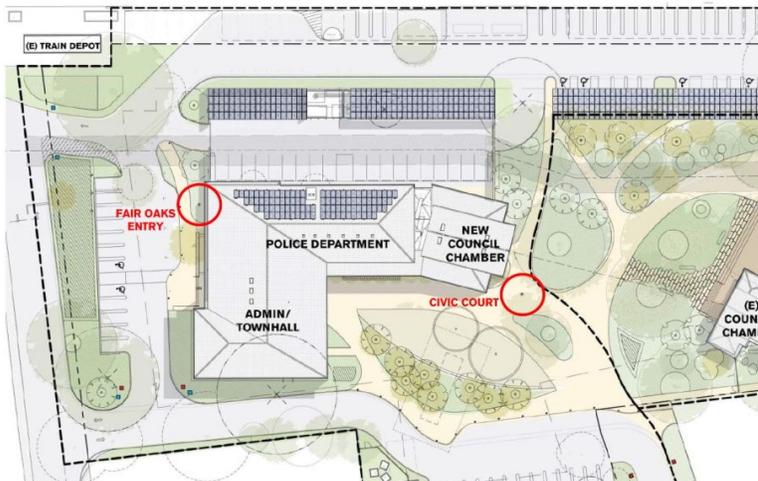


Community News

Atherton City Council agrees on Town Center ballot measure

By law, town doesn't need voter approval to move forward, but will ask for it anyway



The number and placements of flag poles at the new Atherton Town Center required a lot of discussion at a Civic Center Advisory Commission meeting, then again at the Feb. 15, 2017, City Council meeting. It was decided that one flag pole would be in front of the police department building near the Fair Oaks Lane entrance, and another would be in front of the new council chambers, in the park-like common area. (WRNS Studio)

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The business of seeking public approval for financing the proposed Atherton Town Center has become a hike through a brambles patch for the City Council.

First there was Measure L, in 2012, that said the new city administration building and police department should be built by donations.

Then came the difficulty of getting residents to actually chip in the needed money, despite the project's status as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

Then came the recent news from City Attorney William Conners that, as it turns out in state law, Measure L was never binding anyway, but was only advisory. The town can legally proceed to pay for the Town Center using whatever means the City Council can find.



Atherton City Attorney William Conners at the Feb. 15, 2017, City Council meeting. (John Orr / Daily News)

But still, the City Council doesn't want to just ignore the wishes of those voters in 2012, so on Wednesday night it approved the wording of a ballot measure that, in effect, negates Measure L.

The text of the measure as vetted on Wednesday reads, “Measure L was approved by Atherton voters in 2012 as an advisory measure supporting the use of donor funds as the primary funding source for the Civic Center Project. Since 2012, the Town has spent four years in the design process, completed 100% Design Development and is now engaged in the preparation of construction documents. Donor funds have served as the primary funding source for all of this design work; but current donations are not sufficient to complete construction of the designed project.

“The City Council has developed a funding plan that would supplement current and future private donations with available general funds without adding any new project-specific taxes, changes to the current Parcel Tax or use of the Town’s mandatory reserves. Other funding sources include funds derived from building fees and grants. The City Council would like input from the voters as to how best to proceed with respect to additional funding needs. They pose the following question:

“Should the Town of Atherton supplement private donations with available non-dedicated General Funds to meet the funding shortfall, where one exists, for construction of the new Town Center?”

That measure, which the City Council plans to ask San Mateo County to put on a mail-in-only ballot for the June election, is another advisory vote. It is not legally binding.

The town has a funding plan worked out that gets it within about \$2.4 million of paying for the project.



Atherton Mayor Bill Lempres at the Feb. 15, 2017, City Council meeting. (John Orr / Daily News)

In January, Mayor Michael Lempres said, “The majority of the money is in hand already, in unallocated reserves, and in other fees and funds we can use. We can almost pay for the entire civic center if costs come in as anticipated. We are about \$2.3 million or \$2.4 million short, out of the \$27 million we need.”

Hope lives on that Atherton Now, the committee charged with asking residents to contribute, may come up with that extra couple of million dollars. If that doesn’t happen, said City Manager George Rodericks, the town could turn to bank loans.

Council member Elizabeth Lewis made the motion on Wednesday to move the advisory ballot measure to the November election instead, saying it would save the town about \$20,000. But Lempres noted that such a move would lead to about three months of delays in signing construction contracts, and that it has been established that each month of delay costs the town about \$120,000. Lewis’ motion died for lack of a second.

The City Council also agreed on an address for the Town Center. It will be 80 Ashfield Road. The town could choose any even number between 70 and 100, and Lewis suggested that perhaps it should be 90, since the existing administrative office is at 91 Ashfield Road. But 80 was chosen, maybe at least partly because John Schlueter, a presenter from WRNS Studio, which has designed the Town Center, said he liked 80 because 1980 was the year of his birth.

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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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