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City Council Retreat Recap

The Visalia City Council held its two-day strategic planning workshop Jan. 25-26 to discuss issues related to the budget, neighborhood preservation, gangs, and planning. City staff, the media and the public were in attendance. Recaps from staff presentations are included and are posted on the city's website at www.ci.visalia.ca.us. We begin with a list of priorities developed by City Council members at the conclusion of the workshop. Future issues of "Inside City Hall" will provide updates on outcomes of this process.

Priority Picture: After several breakout sessions with Council and staff, a list of priorities was established for Council members to consider and rank in order of their significance to planning purposes. The top 3:

1. East Downtown Infrastructure, including attention to open space and the new Public Safety Building.
2. Maintaining the city's fiscal health.
3. Community beautification, including the West 198 Scenic Corridor.

Priority two projects: updating the General Plan, neighborhood preservation, continuing the emphasis on making Visalia a Cool/Green city, and refining circulation issues as they relate to roads and Measure R. Rounding out the top priorities: Visalia Municipal Airport expansion; retail and business development downtown; employee retirement and health cost issues; increasing regional tourism; public safety, specifically gang suppression efforts; and the development of the Sports Park.

City Budget: The city's budget is at about breakeven going into next year. Administrative Services Director Eric Frost outlined potential issues that could adversely impact this year's General Fund budget, including: Potential state budget takeaways in light of the state's \$14+ billion budget deficit;



stagnant local revenues from the building slowdown and economic decline; ongoing commitments from employee contracts, retiree health and operating costs; capital projects; financial commitments for transportation projects which would encumber the General Fund; demands on city's cash resources; and a lessening of the city's historical competitive advantage. Positive aspects: A balanced budget; property taxes continue to increase from the lag in taxes assessment; projected General Fund expenditures are slightly below budget; and the city has relatively low levels of debt. All combined, a good budget for the next cycle might be to maintain current service levels. To meet this objective, staff recom-

mended the Council consider: developing revenue alternatives to maintain the current budget; review potential cost savings alternatives to improve the City's budget picture, and; a potential Pension Obligation Bond which will be presented at the city's Feb. 19 meeting along with the City's Comprehensive Annual Financial Statement; transportation financing alternatives for advancing Measure R and other road projects, and; a proposal for a Storm Drain rate ballot.

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Neighborhood Preservation: Staff proposed the Council consider the following: a fee-based residential rental inspection program, with the cost to be paid for by property owners; increase home ownership rates in the city's historic districts with a Historic Homes Down Payment Assistance Program; and have the city host a seminar for landlords and property management companies to address substandard housing complaints and property management issues. The two-year-old Neighborhood Preservation Division identifies, assesses and addresses code enforcement issues within the city. Challenges include dilapidated, substandard housing, ineffectively managed rental properties, properties in or entering into foreclosure, abandoned properties and vacant lots, absentee landlords, nuisance properties, and non-maintained historic properties.



Gangs: Fighting gangs in Visalia tops the list of suppression efforts for the Visalia Police Department, but suppression alone won't solve the problem. Council members endorsed Chief Bob Carden's strategies, which include: Jobs programs for youth; cracking down on truancy; and providing training on how to spot gang activity and do something about it. The council endorsed pursuing all of the efforts proposed by Chief Carden. They include:



- Developing a master strategic plan on how to reduce gang membership and violence and outline how the city and its partners work together.
- Using neighborhood youth counselors hired with grant funding the city is currently seeking which would allow former gang members to be hired to work through youth centers to counsel children on how to avoid or get out of gangs.
- Meeting with Visalia Unified School District officials to discuss developing a program targeting children truant from school and involve parents to ensure youth are going to school.
- Possibly teaming with code enforcement officials to issue violations and force the removal of tenants from homes with gang activity.
- Working with youth groups and faith-based organizations on developing future gang summits.
- Considering the creation of a Family Intervention Task Force to identify and assist at-risk families and connect them to resources through the Multi-Agency Gang Task Force.

Planning: Updates are needed to be made to the General Plan, and Council approved these strategies developed by Community Development staff:



- Prepare a work plan for a community-wide comprehensive General Plan update, including a companion Program Environmental Impact Report. While the update will take about three to five years to complete with an estimated cost of \$1 million, staff feels this is the best approach for achieving the City's long-range vision for growth and development in an environmentally defensible manner.
- A work session, to be set within the next 90 days, will consider potential strategies for the West Highway 198 Scenic Corridor.
- Engineering Improvement and subdivision standards will be updated to include contemporary design criteria to better facilitate safe, walkable and aesthetically pleasing neighborhoods.
- A work plan to amend the 2020 Plan and Municipal Code will incorporate the following: Infill strategies; higher minimum residential densities; increases in the population benchmarks for Urban Development Boundaries; and criteria for prioritizing annexation proposals.

FUTURE COUNCIL MEETINGS: A special Council meeting will be held at 4 p.m. Monday, Feb. 11, in Council Chambers to review the Parks and Infrastructure Master Plan for East Downtown. The Council will hold its next work session and regular session on Tuesday, Feb. 19, beginning at 4 p.m. in Council Chambers. A joint City Council/Planning Commission meeting will be held at 4 p.m. Monday, Feb. 25, at the Convention Center.