

Inside City Hall

Beyond the headlines

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MAYOR LOOKS BACK AT 2008: This year brought a deepening recession in our country, in California, and the community. Yet, despite the economic downturn and an estimated \$40 billion state budget deficit forecast for the next 18 months, the City continues to provide services vital to the community. Through prudent fiscal planning over the last two and a half years, layoffs have been avoided although \$1.848 million in positions have been frozen. Administrative actions including the shifting of personnel, curbing operating expenses, and the phasing out and outsourcing of programs brought additional savings.

Challenges bring opportunities, and 2008 had its share of accomplishments and improvements in services for Visalia's citizens.

- **Decline in city's violent crime rate** – While the city's overall crime rate increased by 4 percent from Jan. 1 through Nov. 30, 2008, compared to the same time period last year, there was a 7 percent decrease in violent crimes and an 11 percent decrease in arrests. Property crimes increased by 8 percent. There was a marked overall decrease of 24 percent in gang violent crimes consisting of homicide, assault, and drive-by shootings. There was a 19 percent decrease in assaults and a 29 percent decrease in shootings.
- **New Northwest Visalia Fire station and Training Center:** The opening of the new Fire Station at Shirk and Ferguson is scheduled for March 1, and will improve emergency response efficiency by 30 percent and provide paramedic services by the unit responding. A state-of-the-art training facility will provide training opportunities in fire service, fire attack, and rescue.
- **Funds assist in foreclosures:** The City was allocated \$2,388,331 by the federal government to address the foreclosure crisis. The funds will be used to acquire, rehabilitate and resell about 20 foreclosed homes to eligible families.
- **New Home for SPCA:** City Council approved a new location for the SPCA Shelter just north of the existing site. The new facility, to be between 16,000 and 25,000 square feet, includes new technology to maximize animal well-being, staff and volunteer efficiency, and workplace quality and safety.
- **Commercial development:** Although the economic slowdown put the new Home Depot on hold, the east side of Orchard Walk is now home to a new Target, Sportsman's Warehouse, PetSmart, Ross, Famous Footwear, Radio Shack, GameStop, McDonalds, Subway, and Mountain Mike's Pizza. Other new developments include a new Longs Drug store at Caldwell and Demaree and a new 80-room Hampton Inn on 198, a new Nissan/ Honda/ Toyota dealership complex at Ben Maddox and Tulare, the renovation of the Razarri building, now fully leased at Bridge and Center, the expansion of the Surroz Dodge Chrysler Auto Center which includes a BMW dealership near Highways 198 and 99, and the first phase of the Country Club Shopping Center at Demaree and Houston includes a CVS Pharmacy.
- **Jobs:** A \$100 million renovation to a milk dehydration plant at California Dairies is currently underway, bringing with it 100 new jobs; the expansion of International Paper and a 110,000-square-foot expansion of Butler Steel Manufacturing to be completed by June, 2009, promises 110 new jobs; and the \$100 million expansion of the Kaweah Delta Medical Center Tower on Acequia and Locust is nearing completion.
- **Roadway improvements:** The design was completed on the conversion of Acequia Avenue to two-way traffic, and construction is scheduled to be completed by late January; the design was completed on

the Santa Fe Bridge and Ben Maddox Interchange projects; and signalization and related roadway improvements will be made on Mooney Boulevard at the Whitendale and Walnut Avenue intersections and at Cypress and Akers.

- **Transportation impact fees adjusted to stimulate growth:** After a long and in-depth process, the City revised its transportation impact fees which are necessary to provide roads for new development. The collaborative process between the City and developers demonstrated that cooperation produces its best results and the problem of new streets found a mutually agreeable solution.

- **High Speed Rail Moves Closer:** With voter approval of the High Speed Rail bonds in November, the long anticipated high speed rail system has taken a significant step to eventual construction. City staff continues to work with High Speed Rail Authority consultants and staff on possible rail alignments and potential locations for a future station stop in our region.

Despite the challenges, we've accomplished much this year. If we stay the course and work together, 2009 can bring out the best for all of us. Visalia is only as good as its citizens and the work of those committed to make it better. May the efforts of us all bring about a prosperous New Year.

ACEQUIA TWO-WAY CONVERSION UPDATE: The Acequia Conversion to two-way is moving forward toward completion. Work continued to progress throughout December for the conversion of Acequia Avenue from one way to two-way. The contractor on the project, Cruco Construction and his subcontractor, installed many of the components needed for the extensive underground infrastructure along Acequia. This infrastructure includes underground conduit and wire, pull boxes, and large concrete footings, to support the new signal poles. Anyone who has recently traveled along Acequia Avenue will notice some of the poles and signal equipment have started to be installed. Work on the conversion started in October, and will continue throughout January. The actual conversion is planned to occur at the end of this month, barring any delays due to the weather. As requested by the City Council, the contractor attempted to provide the least disturbance to the public during the busy holiday season, which included completing work that required significant traffic impacts prior to the Thanksgiving weekend, and scheduling the conversion for after the holidays. Items to be completed prior to conversion: Installation, modification and testing of the signals at the intersections at Willis, West, Locust, and Court; and new traffic striping and marking which will be installed immediately prior to the conversion, along with the new signage necessary to redirect traffic. This work will be done in a very short time frame, and on a weekend, since it will require the closing of some of the through lanes along Acequia. As soon as this work has been completed, the conversion will be made, and traffic will be open in both directions. Further notification will be provided to the public just prior to the conversion, including traffic signage that will be placed near the project. Information: Rebecca Keenan at 713-4541.

CITY'S BUILDING PERMITS TOTAL 3,776 FOR 2008: The total number of building permits issued by the city in 2008 were at their third lowest in a decade. The permit numbers breakdown as follows: 496 for new single family dwellings; 19 multi-family units; 1,150 new residence additions/alterations; 81 new commercial permits; 379 new commercial additions, alterations and signs, and 1,651 miscellaneous permits. The total value of all permits issued for 2008 was \$219,022,219, the second lowest amount since 1999.

FALL DROP-OFF PROGRAM SERVES 890 IN '08: The City's Fall Drop-Off program provided free green waste dumping service to about 890 customers in 2008, and handed out about 500 yards of composting material at its two locations, Wood Industries and Tulare County Biomass. The program costs the city about \$15,000, or about \$16.85 per participating customer, which includes the cost of collection and compost handed out. The City, in collaboration with Tulare County Biomass and Wood Industries, hosts an annual Fall Drop-Off program for Visalia citizens to drop off brush, tree trimmings and other green waste at no charge and receive a free yard of composting material.

COUNCIL RETREAT SET FOR JAN. 23-24: The economy, circulation and the East Downtown Specific Plan will be among the updates and reports to be presented by staff at the City Council's annual retreat, set for Jan. 23-24 at the Visalia Convention Center. The public is invited to attend the retreat, scheduled for 12:30 to 9 p.m. Friday, Jan. 23, and 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 24.

COUNCIL, SCHOOL BOARD RECEIVE BUDGET UPDATE: The fiscal fog continues without a plan for the state to resolve the largest deficit ever. Administrative Services Director Eric Frost told members of the City Council and the Visalia Unified School Board that Visalia's General Fund-supported operations are the most vulnerable to the current state economic and political conditions. The fiscal management failure of the State has brought about the potential for non-reimbursement of grants, problems with potential debt issues, demobilization of current CalTrans projects, and stresses on Measure R reimbursement for regional road projects within Visalia, such as the Santa Fe Overcrossing. Finance expects the City's budgeted revenues will be off for Fiscal year 2008/09, but maybe less than \$1 million from budget. On the plus side, the City is benefiting from the steep energy cost decline and expects to see \$250,000 in fuel costs savings. An anticipated budgetary savings of \$2 million is expected from the City's aggressive approach to holding open positions. The City has also taken steps to reduce overtime and training expenses and restructure the delivery of services such as the Senior Meals. An emergency cash reserve equal to 25% of the operating General Fund expenditures has been set aside by Council. Increases in pension costs, operating contracts and capital costs are expected against a scenario of flat or declining major revenues. Actions to date have helped Visalia avoid more drastic actions.

FORECLOSURE PROGRAM OUTLINED: Staff provided City Council and Visalia Unified School Board members with a status report on foreclosures in the City. As of Dec. 31, 2008, there were about 1,700 pre-foreclosed, auctioned and foreclosed properties in Visalia, with August representing the highest rate of foreclosure filings over the past 12 months. The Council approved combining both local and national funds to acquire foreclosed properties and resell them. A total of \$2.88 million will be used to acquire, rehabilitate and resell foreclosed properties. Proceeds from the sale will be used to purchase more homes, with the ultimate goal of purchasing and reselling between 30-50 homes. Funding was made available through a combination of Community Development Block grant funding (\$2.38 million) and \$500,000 in a one-time allocation of Redevelopment funds. The establishment of new programs such as the Foreclosure Registration Maintenance Program, a Receivership program and a program designed to combat new homes that have been partially constructed or abandoned by the developer is part of the City's effort to aggressively pursue abandoned or neglected homes.

CITIZENS POLICE ACADEMY ACCEPTS APPLICATIONS: The Visalia Police Department is now accepting applications for this year's "Citizens Police Academy", a 10-week course designed to acquaint prospective volunteers with the inner workings of the department while being trained to become a "Volunteer In Police Service" (VIPS). Upon successful completion of this course and background investigation, members will be sworn in as a VIPS, ready to assist in essential non-hazardous duties. There will be an informational meeting open to interested community members at 6 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 22, at City Council Chambers at 707 W. Acequia Ave. Classes are scheduled to begin Thursday March 12, from 6 to 9 p.m. Applications are available through Jan. 30, at Visalia Police Headquarters, 303 S. Johnson St., District 1 office at 204 N.W. Third, District 2 office at 4100 S. County Center, and the substation at Visalia Mall. Information: Angie de Alba, Crime Prevention Coordinator at 713-4370.

MOONEY BOULEVARD PROJECT UPDATE: Work is continuing on the Mooney Boulevard project, according to CalTrans Public Affairs Office Tami Conrado. Currently the Mooney

Boulevard project is in winter suspension at the request of the contractor. This winter suspension was planned back in September and has nothing to do with funding. During a winter suspension a contractor can do some non-critical work, however no pavement will be removed until the weather and temperature will allow for ideal conditions for new pavement to be installed. Finishing touches are now being completed in Stage 1B. In regards to the funding of this project, all decisions will be made with the passing of the State Budget, which as of today is still being determined.

DUI CHECKPOINT SET FOR JAN. 16: The Visalia Police Department will be conducting a DUI/Drivers License checkpoint on Friday, Jan. 16. In an effort to reduce the number of persons killed and injured in alcohol involved crashes, DUI checkpoints are conducted to identify offenders and get them off the street, as well as educate the public on the dangers of impaired driving. This DUI/Drivers License checkpoint is an effort to reduce those tragedies, as well as insuring drivers have a valid driver's license. A major component of these checkpoints is to increase awareness of the dangers of impaired driving and to encourage sober designated drivers. Traffic volume and weather permitting, all vehicles may be checked and drivers who are under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs will be arrested. The public is encouraged to help keep roadways safe by calling 911 if they see a suspected impaired driver. Funding for this operation is provided by a grant from the California Office of Traffic Safety, through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. If you have any questions, contact Sergeant Steven Phillips at 713-4216.

FIRST LIVE GUITAR SOLO COMPETITION SET: The City of Visalia Parks and Recreation Department will be holding the first Live Guitar Solo Competition on Friday Jan. 16, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Main Street Theater, 307 E Main St. Box office opens at 5:30 pm. Over 20 contestants auditioned in November for the opportunity to perform in the finals. Only ten finalists were selected. The community is invited to come and enjoy the talents of Visalia's finest youth guitarists. Tickets are on sale for \$5 and may be purchased at the Anthony Community Center at 345 N. Jacob or at Whites Music at 100 E. Caldwell. Tickets will also be sold on the day of the event for \$7. For more information, contact Ramsey Ochoa at 713-4508 or email rochoa@ci.visalia.ca.us.

*Inside City Hall is a publication of the City of Visalia.
For more information, visit the City's website at www.ci.visalia.ca.us, email nloliva@ci.visalia.ca.us or call 713-4535*