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Appeals cost process

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Until reading my fellow columnist Don Bennett's piece last week, I hadn't thought of how variable costs were being charged to those taking out building permits. As Don pointed out, it doesn't seem fair to charge an applicant for the total cost of work required to respond to an appeal or litigation brought on by a third party.

While individual citizens should expect support from the city in objecting to a proposed project, groups who band together and hire professional assistance to require major technical reviews should be expected to shoulder some of the cost burden, especially if the arguments seem frivolous.

If the city wants to require an applicant to do major work to satisfy a group complaint, it should be willing to take on some of the cost. As long as there's no cost to the city, the council can be very generous in requiring expenditure of the applicant's money.

In the case of the Target-anchored East Washington Place shopping center, we saw how such a group, the Petaluma Community Coalition, caused many increased costs and delays to the developer, and losses in sales tax to the city estimated at over \$500,000. In the end, PCC received over \$150,000 in settlement fees to cease objecting to the project.

The tactic of increasing the developer's costs while delaying the project to bring about a settlement for individuals isn't the case of supporting the individual citizen's right to protest. A policy needs to be made to moderate and revise how these costs are assessed.

This procedure is about to be utilized again. A new organization, Petaluma Neighborhood Association, with the same principals, is organizing to do something similar regarding the proposed Lowe's-anchored Deer Creek Village shopping center project on North McDowell Boulevard across from the hospital.

The movement against the Lowe's center is much more organized. (Thanks perhaps to the previous settlement?) The sponsoring organizations held a workshop to generate support and increase neighborhood solidarity for future action. They're clearly organizing to mount an attack on the Lowe's center project, which will cost the city a similar loss of sales tax revenue.

Will the Lowe's center project be a repeat of the Target center experience and also cost the city hundreds of thousand of dollars in lost sales tax? It's sure looking that way.

With all the Sonoma County cities having to transfer much of their redevelopment funds back to the state, it looks like our budget will again be put at risk. I see no way



that public finances will improve in the near and not so near future. Perhaps it's time for the City Council to consider total city reorganization.

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Personnel and staffing are probably at the lowest level they'll ever be at. Now is the time for major policy decisions about staffing and finance to begin to be discussed.

I've no doubt our city manager is up to his ears in such thoughts, but there's no knowledge of what's being considered out here in the greater community. Is he following some council direction or will he present a full-blown reorganization to the council at some meeting?

We will probably need some sort of special tax to stabilize our employment and have funds for fixing streets while staying solvent. But that won't happen until the citizens agree with whatever reorganization and funding is proposed. Our streets are getting in worse shape every year, but there's no information about what the city's street repair policy is. The more citizens are kept out of the process, the more difficult this will be.

For example: an article in last weeks paper noted that all the five employees laid off were able to find other positions within the city organization. If money-saving required those five to be laid off, why couldn't the five vacant positions they found have been left vacant and they left in their original jobs?

Was any money saved in that process?

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