

*City Council
The Independent
Nov 2, 2003*

Belmont announces council assignments

The Belmont City Council made its annual assignments last week, deciding who will represent the city at various regional committees. Vice Mayor Dave Bauer volunteered to attend the City/County Association of Governments board meetings and be the liaison for the Harbor Industrial Area, a business organization for the unincorporated district between San Carlos and Belmont.

Coralin Feierbach will represent Belmont at monthly meetings for waste treatment and South County Fire Authority. Dave Warden will also sit on the fire board and continue his involvement on the San Mateo County library governing board.

Councilmember Phil Mathewson will speak up for Belmont on traffic issues at Peninsula Traffic Congestion Relief Alliance meetings. Mayor George Metropulos will sit on the Notre Dame de Namur University advisory board and the San Mateo County Council of Cities.

City Council tries to calm traffic troubles

'Bulb-outs' worry residents along Hiller Street in Belmont

BY MICHELE LEUNG
Independent Newspapers

BELMONT — The City Council Tuesday took a stab at calming nerves frayed by the city's traffic "calming" measures along Hiller Street.

In September, in the Sterling Downs neighborhood, city crews put in "bulb-outs" — low cement disks extending out from the curb designed to slow down drivers along Hiller Street. But residents complained that the devices make it too difficult for cars in opposite directions to turn to and from Hiller.

Resident Joe Dermenjian recalled that his mother got into an accident recently when she ruined her car wheel and rim trying to get through the intersection.

Neighborhood association president Bill Dickenson said the city has not followed its own traffic calming program of giving notice to residents and holding public meetings. He said he and his neighbors just want the city to pick up where it left off — to continue having meetings with the neighborhood, announce what the plans are and find a solution quickly. However, Public Works Director Ray Davis disputes that the city did not follow proper procedures.

"There were public meetings," Davis

said. "There was a City Council public meeting on the issue. There was an extensive public process."

Councilmember Coralin Feierbach agreed the devices made driving through the Hiller intersections difficult and urged the council to take up this issue at a later date.

"It is unattractive and a stilted way of doing it," she said. "It's potentially dangerous. It's not a proper solution."

Feierbach also asked staff to review if the traffic calming program was followed in this case.

Dickenson said he is frustrated at the snail-like pace for the city and the council to accomplish things through the public process. He said the city has

not fully appreciated the level of frustration residents have toward the bulb-outs. Past neighborhood meetings on the topic have attracted 40 people, he said. Dickenson said that requests to find a resolution with the city have been met with "bureaucratic finger-pointing," reflecting poorly on the city manager's office and the city.

"It's an inefficient way to run a small city," he said.

The traffic calming plan in Sterling Downs began in 1999, when the city received a \$300,000 grant to provide a means for students to walk to nearby Nesbit Elementary School safely. Neighbors had been complaining that

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BULB-OUTS: Confusion

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drivers were speeding down Hiller, too.

"This originated at the request of residents of the area," Davis said.

Drivers who try to turn at Hiller Street and Oxford Way say the intersection is too narrow now because of the bulb-out devices. Residents have complained that traffic has come to a standstill because it is difficult for two

cars to turn at the same time, making a bad situation even worse.

Davis said his office has received complaints about the devices and he is not surprised. He attributed the frustration to residents having to readjust their driving patterns.

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mleung@smindependent.com.

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Anger brewing over traffic 'bulb-out' in Belmont Congestion

Traffic calming islands on Oxford Way and Hiller Street in Belmont.

Residents say two cars can't turn safely at the same time on Oxford

BY MICHELE LEUNG
Independent Newspapers

BELMONT — Howard Zhong is a nervous wreck every time he has to drive through the intersection of Hiller Street and Oxford Way.

In September, the city put in "chokers" or "bulb-outs," low cement blocks designed to slow down traffic along Hiller in the Sterling Downs neighborhood. Zhong contends that the devices make for a more dangerous driving experience.

He explained that recently while trying to make a right turn onto Oxford from Hiller, traffic came to a standstill when he and another driver realized they could not both turn the corner without hitting each other in the narrowed lanes.

"It sure was a nerve-rattling experience," Zhong said. "I hated those chokers since day one. They are too dangerous."

Similar frustration is spilling over in Sterling Downs over the bulb-outs. Zhong said he challenges any member of City

Council to make a turn on Oxford without hitting the curb or other cars.

The traffic calming plan in Sterling Downs dates to 1999, when the city received a \$300,000 grant to provide safety for students crossing

the street at nearby Nesbit Elementary School. Neighbors had complained that speeders use Hiller as a shortcut to El Camino Real.

"This originated at the request of residents of the area," said Public Works Director Ray

Davis.

Davis said the city relied on consultants and worked with the neighborhood to address their traffic concerns. Neighbors counter that they were not notified about meetings or the plan.

"There were public meetings," Davis said. "There was a City Council public meeting on the issue. There was an extensive public process."

Neighbors say the city has been ignoring their concerns. A small number of residents met with Davis already; they want the devices moved altogether or made smaller. The city has put in solar reflectors to make the hazard more apparent. Residents want more done.

"They didn't do anything for residents after polite requests," said neighborhood association President Bill Dickenson.

Kevin Gruener said he does not see how the devices could possibly slow down cars.

"It makes traffic worse," he said. "It disappoints me. It's embarrassing. It's a reflection of how good the city is and what the thought process is."

Neighbor Sherry Agrella said it makes for more congestion because cars have to back up in order to let other drivers turn. She suggests that the intersection of Chesterton Avenue and Oxford could use some study from city traffic engineers.

"I just feel they [the bulb-outs] should not be as large as they are," she said. "It ham-

pers people trying to turn corners. If stop signs were placed effectively elsewhere, it would be beneficial to the neighborhood."

Dickenson said that the city has not fully realized the level of residents' frustration. A neighborhood meeting on the devices attracted 40 residents.

"This traffic calming situation has brought everything to a head," said Dickenson. "They're asking for somebody's head on a platter."

Davis attributes the frustration to having to change ingrained habits. While the most aggravated residents have been the most vocal, he said that he has heard positive comments about the bulb-outs as well.

"People who have been driving in that neighborhood for five, 10 years have to change the track and speed at which they enter their neighborhood," he said. "Some people misjudge it. Anytime you change something, you're going to get calls. It doesn't surprise me that people are concerned."

Council eager for new business opportunity

Report said some ventures could flourish — even now

BY MICHELE LEUNG
Independent Newspapers

BELMONT — Belmont shoppers would surely patronize additional new restaurants in the city, as well as independent booksellers and clothing stores, according to a just-released economic development report compiled for the city.

City officials have asked consultants from Berkeley-based Bay Area Economics to prepare a strategy to outline methods to diversify the city's economic base.

The report listed about 50 recommendations the city can undertake to bring more businesses to Belmont. These include providing maps and guides at retail stores, kiosks and other venues to create a central shopping district and focusing on arts facilities to strengthen the city's identity as an arts and education center.

The report addressed "leakage" — the fact that residents shop outside the city for certain goods. For example, Belmont lacks specialty stores, like those on Laurel Street in San Carlos. Consultants said that the city would benefit from some apparel shops. The city also has room to support additional restaurants that would serve college and

high school students. A restaurant like P.F. Chang's China Bistro would also do well due to affluent families in Belmont and large employers like Oracle, the report said. Because of the value of education, a store like Books, Inc. would also do well.

The next step is to assemble an economic summit team sometime early in the new year.

One part of that strategy could be focusing on a niche and allowing it to bring in related businesses. For example, because Belmont has been recognized as an environment rich for the arts, the city could be the home of an arts center that would in turn draw in more restaurants, galleries and art

supply stores.

"The synergy draws its own economic development," City Manager Jere Kernsar said.

Many in the community have used the arts as one of Belmont's selling points, as did the economic reports from the consultants, but Councilmember Coralin Feierbach said too much emphasis is put on the arts.

"Art performances, that's fine. But there's got to be a way to produce money," she said.

"With a consortium of artists, cities have to provide subsidies so that's not going to produce income."

Feierbach said perhaps the city should

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*copy from the article
Nov. 25, 2003*

REPORT: Belmont leaders look for more revenue

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focus more technology.

"Companies that start here and expand," she said.

She said the key is to find businesses willing to set up shop in Belmont and doing what it takes for business owners so that they stay here. A small step is the Planning Commission giving the green light Nov. 18 to allow restaurants to play live music.

"It's a beginning," Feierbach said.

Feierbach and her colleague Councilmember Dave Warden have suggested the city go after the likes of a Fry's Electronics, a Ferrari dealership or a Trader Joe's grocery. Councilmember Dave Bauer favors the idea of additional auto dealerships.

"They give us the biggest bang for our buck," Bauer said.

Warden said it is time to put the report to good use and begin talking to businesses. Now is time to take advantage of a calm political climate in Belmont, he said. Other factors going in the city's favor include residents that are highly educated and affluent, a four-year university, and a location near the freeway.

"People are tired," he said. "The report is the last word of the talk. It's time we get to

action."

Councilmembers have talked about the importance of hiring an economic director who can go after businesses, but Warden has been more pointed and said that responsibility should come from the City Manager's office, especially since finances make it difficult to hire an extra staff person.

"In my opinion, times are tough," Warden said. "We need to get this done."

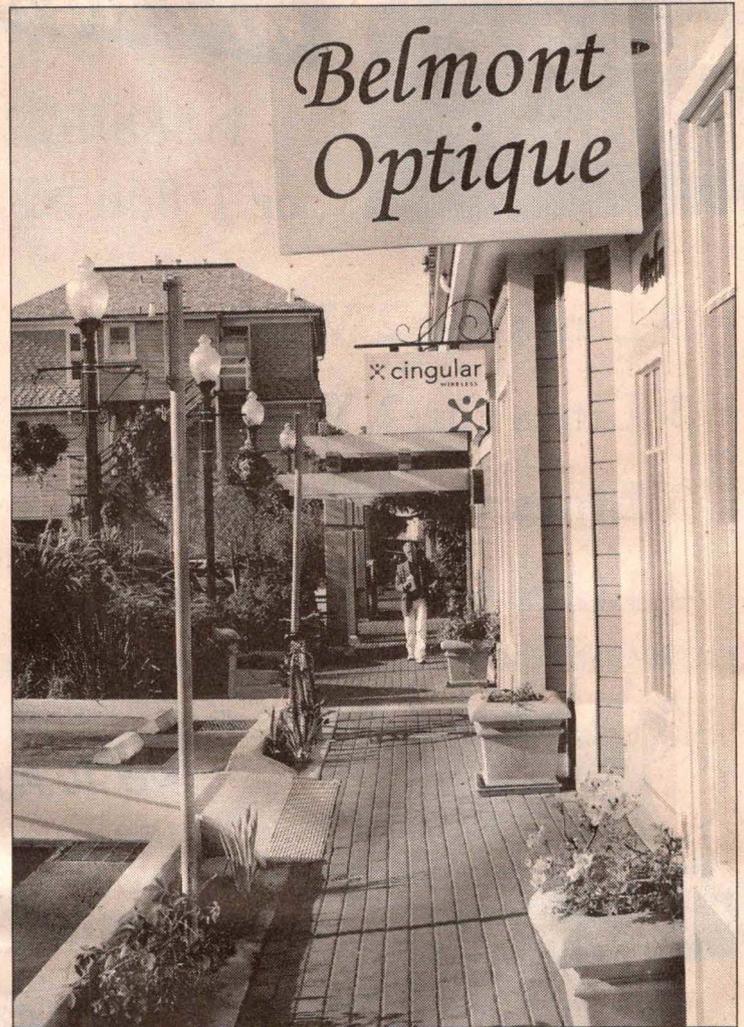
But Kersnar said it is more complicated than hiring a person. Whether the job is to develop a downtown, to go after businesses to occupy an empty plot or to build a performing center, those are completely different functions.

"We have to decide what we're trying to accomplish," Kersnar said.

The council is united in making something happen. If past actions are any indications, the council has shown that it can get things done, Mayor George Metropulos said.

"The next logical step to move forward," he said. "With the city hall and the fire station, we're moving forward."

Contact Michele Leung at 556-1556, Ext. 6 or mleung@smindependent.com.



SUSAN CALDWELL

A small shopping center near Ralston and El Camino in Belmont.

Metropulos seated as new Belmont mayor

Violet, Mathewson also serve in new city roles this fall

BY MICHELE LEUNG
Independent Newspapers

BELMONT — Elementary school age kids usually have little interest in City Council meetings, but a handful of them brought in their parents to watch their teacher, George Metropulos, sworn in as the city's new mayor Wednesday.

Alex Reid, now a fourth grader, was in Metropulos' class last year. He attended the council meeting with his sister Sarah, a second grader.

"Neither of them will have the fear to speak up in council meetings now," said

their mother, Michelle Reid.

Even though there were no elections in Belmont this fall, there are still some residents who are coming into new roles as city leaders. Elsewhere, familiar faces were stepping aside. Past and current elected officials, as well as well-wishers, were on hand to see the City Council reorganized. Metropulos will now sit in the middle chair on the dais and hold the gavel. He is joined by council newcomer Phil Mathewson.

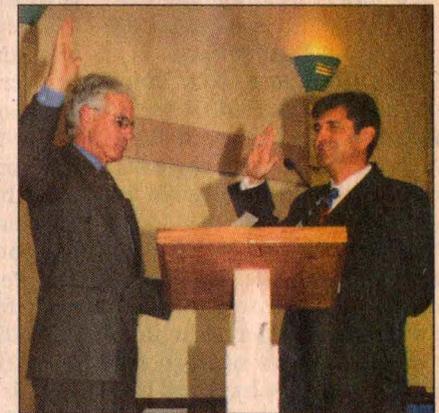
"One trait clearly stands out about the residents of Belmont," Mathewson said. "We are passionate about trees and preserving open space, about safeguarding and protecting our neighborhoods, about traffic on Ralston Avenue, about

developing a vibrant downtown with a sustainable collection of diverse shops. Let's harness that energy and passion and make our future happen now."

Outgoing former mayor Paul Wright has moved to Arizona, while Councilmember Dave Warden returns for another four-year term and rounds out the five-member body along with Coralin Feierbach and Dave Bauer.

John Violet was sworn in as the new City Treasurer, replacing Howard Mason, who held the seat for the past eight years. Violet was on the Finance Commission for a decade.

"It's significant that I asked Howard to swear me in, as a symbolic passing of



JENNIFER BOSMA
Mayor George Metropulos, right, is sworn in by predecessor Paul Wright on Nov. 12.

the torch," Violet said. "Our friendship goes back 20 years."

Terri Cook was re-appointed to her current post as City Clerk.

But the night belonged to Metropulos. With no new agenda, his goal is to continue projects already underway, including revamping City Hall, building a new library and finding new affordable housing in the city.

"I'm one of five councilmembers," he said. "There are no personal things I'm going to do on my own. I want to work to build Belmont's foundation for the future and continue working on those priorities."

"We have neat things to be proud of," he said. "We cut \$2 million because of the state budget, but we're a heck of a lot better off than neighboring cities."

Metropulos, a third grade teacher at Central Elementary School, said he wants to make municipal affairs understandable and simple for everyone, just like he would for his students. Meetings should be conducted in plain English, he said.

"I want to make city government accessible," he said.

Metropulos is teaching on a part-time basis this year, in part to accommodate new mayoral duties, which will include ceremonial functions. When Wright moved to Arizona in the summer, Metropulos gladly jumped in when Wright was unavailable. One recent day involved introducing U.S. Rep. Anna Eschoo at a town hall meeting and speaking at an Eagle Scout ceremony where Belmont scouts were being recognized. There is something refreshing about not cutting money away from organizations' budget or hearing complaints from residents.

"That's the fun stuff," Metropulos said.

A former student said that his penchant in getting involved in community events was apparent four years ago.

"He'd encourage community service by doing it," said Annie Rosenthal, now a seventh grader. "He'd go to everybody's soccer games and plays."

Metropulos' first duty as Belmont's top dog was spent vis-

iting the economics classes at Carlmont High School, where he judged students' business plans. Already the announcer at the school's football and basketball games, he said he looks to be able to spend more time at the high school, his alma mater.

"I consider myself a regular guy," he said. "I don't think I've changed."

CITY COUNCIL
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
NOV. 13, 2003

BELMONT

Council members sworn into office

By Jason Dearen

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — New Belmont Mayor George Metropulos is taking a measured approach to his new job.

"My whole philosophy as mayor is that I'm still only one vote on the council. I'm not the type of person that has all the ideas to do on my own. The role of mayor is facilitator."

Creating more communication between the city's emerging neighborhood associations and finding creative ways to deal with looming budget woes are two of his goals for the next four years.

A third-grade teacher at Central Elementary, Metropulos was one of five city officials sworn into office Wednesday night in front of a capacity crowd filled with his fellow teachers and students. Councilman Dave Warden, new Councilman Phil Mathewson, new City Treasurer John Violet and City Clerk Terri Cook also took the oath of office.

But finding new ways to deal with a looming budget deficit was the theme of the night, and each council member had his own ideas on the issue.

Warden said he supports making the City Manager's office take on a new responsibility as an economic development director — someone who can help the city strategize on ways to create revenue. "Instead of hiring someone new, we should use current city staff to help with economic development," he said. Warden said his idea had not yet been presented to city staff.

Newcomer Mathewson, a former planning commissioner, said he supports creating a downtown core of shops to help revitalize the local economy. "The city has four or five acres east of



METROPULOS

Highway 101 that can be developed. I'm not a proponent of big-box stores, but it's a possibility."

Metropulos said he wants the city to spend the \$4 million it has in Redevelopment Agency funds over the next five years to help develop more revenue for the city.

While those sworn in Wednesday agreed that dealing with the budget is issue No. 1, each presented differing opinions about the council's other challenges.

Mathewson wants to establish a public works commission so citizens can have a formal process for giving input on traffic, parking and other projects. "It is my feeling that more goes into decisions on public works projects than is generally recognized. A public works commission could review such issues and recommend actions and policy to the Council."

Finding money to keep the fire department from making further cuts is a priority for Warden, who also serves on the South County Fire board. "We need to be clever and find the money to keep the fire department in one piece."

The council also took time to honor outgoing City Treasurer Howard Mason, who has served for eight years and been in local politics for 25.

Wright offers reflections after four years

Mayor leaves Belmont for Arizona desert; Wednesday will be his last at City Hall

BY MICHELE LEUNG
Independent Newspapers

BELMONT — The weather in Arizona is perfectly tolerable from November to April.

Mayor Paul Wright wants others to know that his new home in the desert is not yet an inferno. To make his point, he has cut out the seven-day forecast where it shows that the mercury floats along the 70s. He plans to give the clipping to the City Council's No. 2 man George Metropulos at next week's

council meeting.

"For seven straight days, it shows a sun and a few clouds," Wright said.

There have been a few times when Wright's council stint was marked by high heat. A little perspiration comes with the mayor's office.

Wright will be attending his last Belmont council meeting on Wednesday, when he will say his goodbyes and watch Metropulos succeed him as the new mayor. Since August, Wright has been staying with a friend twice a month to come back for city meetings and to catch up with his clients in the Bay Area.

Wright gives his peers credit for the council being a more effective body

than it was four years ago. Belmont's City Council has been in the process of shedding its dysfunctional reputation. Members are less likely to erupt in open confrontation than they once were.

"If I had any influence, I believe that I have been a stabilizing person on the council," Wright said. When running, "I said that I was a lousy candidate but the perfect councilmember, because I have no strong agenda other than to do the right thing."

Looking back, Wright said that the one act that has struck the biggest nerve with the community was the council's inability to find a unanimous choice to fill a vacant seat. A council

meeting last winter went very late into the night when councilmembers were split 2-2 on possible replacements. There was an impasse. That forced an election and ultimately Coralin Feierbach won the job.

Wright said the comments he heard ranged from disappointment that the council could not come to a resolution to understanding that the mayor did what he could. "There was more feedback on that one situation that all others combined," he said.

Feierbach declined to comment for this story. She had hoped to be appointed to the position that she eventually won through election.

(OVER)

Looking ahead, Wright said Belmont would benefit from adopting an economic development plan and acquiring balanced leadership.

"There is something unique about the way Belmont citizens participate in developing public policy," he said. "They're well-meaning and have lots of different points of view, and they think their point of view is representative of the whole town."

Wright said that good leadership should harness that tension in order to make something productive out of it.

"Left to its own devices, the community will implode," he warned.

Wright will not see the results of his votes on big projects in Belmont. The library, the Atrium, City Hall and police station will not be resolved within a four-year term. Wright said he is not bothered. He has been on the other end before.

Four years ago, when the city was celebrating the end of the grade separation project at Ralston Avenue, the council was driven under the bridge in old cars. Wright remembered

waving to citizens lining the street.

"I was thinking I shouldn't be here. I didn't do squat," he said. "I know I should be prepared for that because this process goes a lot slower than I suspected."

There have been no regrets on Wright's part, though he said that certain decisions have been easier to make once he knew that his time in Belmont would be limited.

"If you're going to run again, your brain cycles through a process: How will people perceive that?" he said. "Once I made the decision to move to Arizona, there was less concern and less consternation."

Consequently, he said he was able to enjoy his mayoral duties more.

The Wrights bought land in Fountain Hills, east of Scottsdale, Ariz., several years ago, but decided to move sooner rather than later so that their youngest daughter, Alex, would not have to transfer high schools. The family lives in a brand new development and shares the land with wildlife such as bobcats, quails and wild pigs.

Fountain Hills is a small town like Belmont, Wright said, and already there have been inquiries from his new neighbors about getting involved in local politics. Conveniently, there is a council race set for the spring.

"The only way I would do it again is when I'm retired or semi-retired or when my daughter is out of high school," he said.

Belmont trims \$500,000 more from budget

By Jason Dearen
STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — The police might take a little longer on calls, and the parks might be a little dingier, but the city will have a balanced budget.

Belmont's City Council cinched the city's belt a lot tighter Tuesday, unanimously approving new budget cuts that will help the city deal with a slumping local economy and increasing state demand on local money.

The new round of cuts will eliminate jobs in the police and parks departments and will force city staff to take more time off throughout the year. "These cuts are deeper, with more impact on service levels that the public will notice," said City Manager Jere Kersnar.

With this latest \$500,000 cut, Belmont has slashed about \$1.5 million from its budget over the past two years. For a city with a \$14 million budget, the sum is significant.

Tuesday's cuts come as no surprise. Back in March, the council approved a budget correction plan that included this round of cuts as a device to offset the state budget's effect on local revenues. Kersnar said the city waited to see if it could hold off, but declining local revenues and the state's budget woes made that impossible.

"We wanted the ability to move quickly if necessary. Now that the state's budget is where it is, we have to do this," he said.

The largest area affected by the new cuts is law enforcement. The police department will also lose an officer and a dispatcher, for a total savings of \$139,000. The city will cut another \$20,000 by suspending its participation in the County's SWAT team. Right now, Belmont contributes one sergeant, two officers, a hostage negotiator and a dispatcher to the SWAT team.

All city staff will be forced to take more time off in the next year — what Kersnar calls a

mandatory furlough — that will save more than \$100,000 in staff costs. This, too, will affect the police the most, because it forces the department to keep minimum staffing levels more often during the year.

Sgt. Patrick Halleran said he is disappointed that the cuts have to be made, but that it shouldn't affect public safety.

"Both of the positions being cut have been empty for a year already," he said. "We're fortunate we have vacant positions to cut, so there will not be adverse affects on public safety at this time."

Dirtier parks

Belmont residents will likely notice the effects of cuts on public parks as well. The city is slashing \$148,000 from the parks and recreation department's maintenance budget. "Residents might notice that certain facilities are a little dirtier because of reduced custodial services," said Kersnar.

A part-time parks-mainte-

Belmont's cuts

- ▶ **One police officer:** \$83,025
- ▶ **One dispatcher:** \$55,564
- ▶ **One parks maintenance worker:** \$60,000
- ▶ **Mandatory staff furlough:** \$108,100
- ▶ **Suspension of SWAT team operations:** \$20,000
- ▶ **Elimination of maintenance on City Hall:** \$10,000
- ▶ **Reduction of repairs to athletic fields:** \$10,000

nance worker position, currently filled by a contract employee, will be eliminated. Regular maintenance on everything from tree-trimming to repairs of athletic fields and park benches will also be affected.

Staff writer Jason Dearen covers Belmont, San Carlos, and Foster City. He can be reached at 348-4329 or by e-mail at jdearen@angnewspapers.com.

OVER

Belmont City Council endorses fire parcel tax

Belmont's City Council unanimously endorsed Measure I Tuesday, a parcel tax on the Nov. 4 ballot that seeks to raise about \$3.2 million a year for the South County Fire Authority.

Voters in Belmont and San Carlos will decide the fate of the parcel tax that will charge homeowners \$88 per year per dwelling; nonresidential property owners will pay 11 cents per square foot per year.

"Eighty-eight dollars a year for seven years is a very low price to pay to keep up a quality of service," said Vice Mayor George Metropulos.

Mayor-elect Dave Warden, who also serves on the fire board, said that if the measure does not pass, firefighters will be laid off and service will suffer.

"Some have said that if people in the private sector are facing layoffs, that the firefighters should have to as well," Warden said. "But when sales go down in the private sector, you can lay off staff. We don't have less fires and less emergencies, we have more."

The South County Fire Authority is a two-partner jurisdiction between the Belmont Fire Protection District and San Carlos. It faced a budget deficit this year of \$750,000.

Belmont signs check for city hall

Detractors say project too costly as bids come in \$600,000 over estimate

BELMONT — The City Council voted unanimously Tuesday to rebuild city hall, despite a higher-than-expected price tag.

The city only received two bids for the project, both of which were more than the estimates. The council awarded the job to the lowest bidder, San Rafael-based Thompson Pacific, which provided a \$6.9 million base bid, which is \$600,000 more than what the city estimated.

The council agreed that the project has to go on. Ultimately, the new building will house all city employees and the police under one roof, while also featuring a one-stop

permit center and a council chamber. The current city hall would have to be retrofitted to meet current seismic standards. In addition, the current police facility is old and dilapidated and was meant to be only a temporary location for the department 20 years ago.

"We have a gun to our heads," Councilmember Dave Warden said, calling the police station "a dungeon."

"It's disgusting," he said. "I wouldn't use this building for a kennel."

The total cost for the project is about \$10 million.

City officials said they were

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An artist's rendering to the \$10 million city hall project planned in Belmont.

SPECIAL TO THE
INDEPENDENT

CITY HALL: Council agrees to pay more

Continued from 1A

disappointed that they only received two bids, which might have hurt the competitive nature of the process. However, the project manager reviewed the bids and concluded that they were not excessively high, and going through an additional bidding process would not produce a different result.

The council nixed other options in favor of going ahead with the project now. The city staff told members they could bid again, redesign the project or reject all bids to find a less expensive solution. However, councilmembers discarded all options to save time and money. Waiting is not an option, they said.

In addressing that the project's cost has gone up in a year, "it's reason more to go forward," Councilmember George Metropulos said.

However, opponents of the project took the opportunity to voice their displeasure. Citing the project's lack of commu-

nity support and benefit, coupled with an already costly price tag, challengers urged the council to not go forward.

"Is going forward so important not to take additional time to weigh our options?" Warren Lieberman said. "I ask the council to give itself some time."

As better alternatives, opponents suggested leasing space out in the city hall to make more revenue, not permanently moving the Police Department, or directing some of the city hall money to other projects with more community support.

But Warden said the building is a necessity.

"No city ever wants to build a new city hall," he said. "It's not as exciting as a new sports complex or a new library...We're not doing this because we want to. We're doing this because we have to."

The council took out some extra features of the project in order to save money. Specifi-

cally, fencing around the police parking area will be eliminated, but decorative wood panels in the council chambers and paint and carpet in stairwells are kept alive in the plans, as is the removal of wall coverings in existing lobbies.

The retrofit proposal dates back to 1989, when conceptual plans for the civic center were drawn up. Seven years later, architects were hired to design a new facility for the Police Department. Progress stalled until 1998, when EKONA was hired to design a retrofitted city hall that would include the police department. However, the City Council scrapped all plans in 2001 when bids came in more than 50 percent over the estimates, putting the project way over budget. In contrast, the bids for the current proposal were only 8 percent more than the estimate.

Contact Michele Leung at
556-1556, Ext. 6 or
mleung@smindependent.com.

CITY COUNCIL
SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES
OCT. 15, 2003

Belmont accepts new City Hall bid

By Jason Dearen

STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — After nearly 15 years of setbacks and disputes, Belmont's City Council unanimously accepted a bid Tuesday night for the retrofitting and construction of a new City Hall and police station.

Even though the council approved the bid, some members still held reservations.

"I feel unsettled and uncomfortable with the bid. But to vote against it at this point seems crazy," said Councilman Dave Bauer.

"Our current Police Department is a dungeon, it's disgusting. I wouldn't use the building as a kennel," said Councilman Dave Warden. "We have an obligation and we have a gun to our head. We don't want to do this. We have to do this."

The Police Department has been in its current facility since 1979, which at the time was billed as its temporary home. The city hired a firm in 1989 to develop conceptual plans for a new civic center, and in 1996, hired EKONA Architecture to design a ret-

rofit of City Hall so that the Police Department could move in.

Bids on that project eventually came in too high — 52 percent over estimates, according to city staff — and the council rejected them, took legal action against EKONA, and decided to start over.

After that, the city hired the architectural firm of KMD.

But only two contractors submitted bids by the city's Oct. 1 deadline. San Rafael-based Thompson Pacific's was the lowest, coming in at just under \$7 million. The other, \$7.1 million, came in from Fairfield-based West Coast Contractors.

The council accepted Thompson's bid Tuesday, even though it exceeded the city's estimates by about \$280,000. Assistant City Manager Dan Rich said the extra money will come from Redevelopment Agency funds and a refund from the Educational Revenue Augmentation Fund, or ERAF.

Groundbreaking is tentatively scheduled for Nov. 12.

City Council
The Independent
Sept 27, 03

Belmont likes plan to save local funds

Initiative would allow voters to veto state efforts to take city's tax money

BY MICHELE LEUNG
Independent Newspapers

BELMONT — The City Council lent its support Tuesday to a proposal that would require voter approval whenever the state wants to take local tax money.

"The grab has got to stop," Vice Mayor George Metropulos said. "The cities are really taking a stand by initiative, by public vote. The citizens are tired of their services being diminished."

Delegates from the League of California Cities, an advocacy group for 478 California cities, recently voted unanimously to sponsor the ballot initiative, giving voters a chance to say whether they want their local taxes to go to Sacramento. The initiative, to appear in the November 2004 election, calls for voter approval before state legislators can take local sales taxes, property taxes and vehicle license fees, previously allocated for libraries, law enforcement and parks.

Belmont is the first city on the Peninsula to formally endorse this plan with a resolution.

This is the first time the League has undertaken such an initiative. Rebecca Elliot, the Peninsula's representative, said that it is time cities do something to stop the flow of local funds.

"When local money is taken away, that impacts the quality of life across the state," Elliot said.

Assistant City Manager Dan Rich agreed.

"We've been playing nice, we've played by the rules," he said. "There is no more risk involved in going this route."

If passed, the initiative would not undo laws the state has already passed nor would it get property taxes back. Instead, the League hopes that it will make it harder for the state to take local revenues that cities depend on.

"We need to stop shifting the cost to local governments so (state legislators) can solve their problems," Elliot said.

The initiative also asks the Legislature to reimburse local governments for expenses of new programs the state requires. So far, California legislators have not always found ways to pay for mandated programs.

The league expects to spend up to \$15 million to get the measure on the ballot. To that end, it has formed Citipac, a political action committee designed to raise the funds.

The initiative comes at a time when local city officials say they see no end to the practice of robbing Peninsula Peters

COUNCIL: More cuts

Continued from 1A

to pay Paul in Sacramento. The newly adopted budget, passed this past August, has not caused much cheer in local government halls. Belmont stands to lose another \$600,000. In addition, the state will start its next fiscal year \$8 billion in the red.

Most of the pain has come from lost property taxes. For the past 12 years, the state has taken a significant amount in property taxes from cities to support public schools, putting the money in Education Revenue Augmentation Funds. Cities argue that the money should have been

returned back to them.

In another area of lost local money, vehicle license fees were suspended in 1998 when flush economic years allowed the Legislature reduce the payments of car owners. These fees are typically dedicated to police, fire and emergency medical services. However, restoring these fees, which Elliot called the most hated tax in California, is proving to be very unpopular, and local governments are expecting to lose this revenue entirely.

Contact Michele Leung at 556-1556, Ext. 6 or mleung@smindependent.com

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Belmont mulls land deal

Property owner wants two homes in canyon

BY MICHELE LEUNG
Independent Newspapers

BELMONT — It seems that for this one time, at least, Belmont can have it both ways when it comes to open space and development.

Tuesday the City Council discussed the possibility of allowing a property owner to build in the San Juan Canyon. As a compromise, the owner would return the majority of his property to the city as open space.

"There could be tradeoffs that could serve both ends," Mayor Wright said. "This is a litmus test. The devil is in the details, but conceptually, I strongly support this."

Scott Piazza, of Hillsborough, owns 13 acres between Lower Lock Avenue and East Laurel Creek Road. He would like to build two houses and two smaller units for overnight guests and devote the rest to the city for trails and open space. His property encompassed 20 lots but as a result of the lot merger program in 2001, it is now consolidated into four lots.

"This is a property (the Piazzas) fell in love with and is where they want to build their retirement home," said Bry Sarté, an engineer with Sherwood Design Engineers.

Sarté said he and the Piazzas

have read through the city's plan of what is allowed in the canyon and feel they can meet all the requirements.

"We are very interested in working with you," he said.

Reaction from the public was mixed. The developer has spoken with members of the San Juan Canyon Preservation Trust, a grass roots organization determined to keep the canyon open, but as a non-profit group, the trust is unable to lobby for individual projects. Instead, Warren Gibson, the president of the organization, spoke for himself.

"A new public hiking trail will be possible," Warren Gibson said. "Two new households will generate minimal traffic. Existing water and sewer lines are adequate. No taxpayer money will be spent. Of course, we would have liked for this land to remain exactly as it is, and in fact the trust came very close to acquiring it a while back. But the proposal we have tonight is a close second in my view."

Gibson has taken on an advisory role for free on this project and as a planning commissioner, he said he would not vote when it comes before the body.

He added that one of the merits of this project was that it could invite future high-end development in the canyon, with minimal impacts to views and wildlife, and more land set

aside for trails.

"Landowners would be able to unlock some value from their property, and some lucky people would get terrific places to live," he said.

However, some residents were less convinced this project would work. Some were concerned about the traffic and the size of the homes and the additional units. The developer said it has been too early to develop any architectural plans.

"I'm not comfortable with this project," said resident Greg Lizak. "I'm seeing a compound. I'm seeing a subdevelopment."

But the City Council expressed their support for Piazza's idea.

"This is the kind of thing we should encourage," Councilmember Dave Warden said. "We don't want to be hypocritical and say we don't want to build anything anywhere."

The prevailing concern was that the project would set a precedent for a network of roads that would be carved out.

"This is the first development in San Juan," Councilmember Coralin Feierbach said. "If there is no precedent (of road extensions), I would support it."

The council's initial endorsement of the plan means the city can begin negotiating with Piazza.

Contact Michele Leung at
556-1556, Ext. 6 or
mleung@smindependent.com.

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City weighs scoreboard against advertising rules

Safeco wants to give Belmont new board

BY MICHELE LEUNG
Independent Newspaper

BELMONT — Safeco Insurance wants to give Belmont a new scoreboard, but the city is not sure the gift is a winning proposition.

Safeco, as in Safeco Field, home of the Seattle Mariners, has been giving away scoreboards to youth baseball programs across the country as part of its 2-year-old "Play Ball" program. Seattle-based Safeco has installed 30 scoreboards each of the two years, picking from 250 applications each year, said Scott Minnix, national "Play Ball" manager.

"It's a gift to the organization," he said. "It's a free scoreboard."

The goal is to strengthen neighborhoods by bringing people together with baseball, Minnix said. He might also have mentioned that the scoreboards are good advertising for the insurance company.

This year, Belmont was one of the cities chosen. Babe Ruth league officials and coaches

would like to retire the current board at Belmont Sports Complex. They say the 30-year-old board, located in right field, is hard to see and small.

"It's not going to cost the city a penny," said Bo Shabatura, president of the Babe Ruth league. "During times when finances are tough, we can update and renovate something for free. (The current board) is functional and smaller, but (the Safeco board) has better visibility, has newer technology and less maintenance."

Youth soccer teams would also use the board.

This is actually the second time the matter has come up in Belmont. Earlier this spring, Belmont coaches were told their application to Safeco made the cut but could not take it because the board violated the city's off-site advertising ordinance, a no-billboard rule. The catch to accepting a \$15,000-scoreboard is to allow Safeco to display its name on one of the panels.

So coaches approached the city of San Carlos to see if that city could make use of a new scoreboard.

"It was too big, so we declined it," said Parks and Recreation director Barry Weiss.

Now, the board is back in the hands of league officials, who want the elected Belmont City Council to overrule staff. Councilmembers ranked this question as one of their high priorities for the next six months.

At issue is allowing advertising on municipal property within a city that bans billboards of any kind.

Councilmember Dave Bauer said he was not bothered by the "passive introduction."

"Most people will go, 'Safeco? What is that?'" he said. "They are very generous in doing this, installing (the scoreboard) and putting down a new platform if needed."

Councilmember Coralin Feierbach differed.

"It would allow any company to put an advertisement on our public property," she said. "Our public parks should not be used for advertisement. How are we going to prevent it? How do we allow one and not another one?"

"It's the principle of it," she

said.

To be able to accept the scoreboard, city officials would have to change the zoning ordinance, first by holding public hearings at the Planning Commission and the City Council. The city can not just make an exception and implement different rules for areas that are zoned the same. The key, Councilmember Dave Warden said, could be to come up with a new designation for the Sports Complex.

"Maybe we need a different park zoning," he said. "If there is enough desire, we can modify the rules to allow it. But how many rules should be changed to the sake of the scoreboard?"

The process, which could also involve the Parks and Recreation Commission, could take several months.

"I'm a little frustrated at some long drawn-out process for something that seems simple," Warden said. "We don't have a rule that allows for it, so we have to make one."

Contact Michele Leung at
556-1556, Ext. 6 or
mleung@sminddependent.com.

NEWS Briefs

Industrial Road work behind schedule

The permanent repair and reconstruction work on Industrial Road in San Carlos is behind schedule, but the city estimates paving work to be completed by Thanksgiving.

Contractors ran into delays when utility lines underground had to be moved when crews were working on storm drains. Another delay was that some of the soil under the asphalt near Branstons Road was tested to have lead contamination. The level of lead is not hazardous and will not harm the workers, said City Engineer Parviz Mokhtari.