

menlofocus

A newsletter for the community from the City of Menlo Park

Spring 2009

A word from the City Manager

Welcome to our spring issue of menlofocus, the City of Menlo Park's community newsletter.

menlofocus is designed to keep you informed about City services, upcoming events, activities, and policy decisions.



This issue includes information about the work we're doing on preparing next year's budget during these challenging financial times, as well as stories about a recent gang sweep, our collaboration with area communities to help us look out for the best interests of residents with the voter-approved high speed train, and an update on the community process currently underway to create a plan for the downtown and El Camino Real areas.

Your city staff understands that we are living in uncertain times, and that there is heightened interest in the City of Menlo Park's finances and budget process. With that in mind, we urge you to visit our new web page, dedicated to providing residents with all the latest information about the City budget, our current best thinking about revenues and expenses, and what steps we are taking to ensure Menlo Park balances the current needs of residents with the future needs of the community. The page is updated regularly, so please check it out and give us your feedback.

As always, we're interested in your ideas for future stories. Please contact our editor, community engagement manager Cherise Brandell, at cebrandell@menlopark.org or call 650.330.6618. We're also looking for your feedback on how we can improve to better meet your needs—please contact Cherise if you have suggestions.


Glen Rojas
Menlo Park City Manager

Major law enforcement sweep dismantles local violent gang



One of ten automobiles seized (pictured left).

Some of the cash seized during the raids (pictured below).

On Saturday March 7, more than 500 area law enforcement personnel assembled in the dark morning hours in a hanger at Moffett Field for the largest coordinated gang sweep in Peninsula history. Fourteen FBI SWAT teams, in partnership with police officers from Menlo Park, East Palo Alto and other communities, simultaneously raided gang houses, including four in Menlo Park, making over 40 arrests and seizing over \$250,000 in cash, 20 automatic weapons, 10 cars and large amounts of narcotics.



Sergeant Eric Cowans of the Menlo Park Police Department, served as Menlo Park's lead officer on the FBI task force, created to infiltrate and eliminate the "Taliban Gang" through this effort. According to Sergeant Cowans, "the gang initially formed in 2002 as a splinter group from a group called the Midtown Hogs. This group started out as the young 'muscle' of the Midtown Hogs then created their own group, calling themselves the Taliban for the intimidation that the name caused." Since its inception, the Taliban gang has been associated with armed robberies, strong arm robberies, drug trafficking, weapons possession, and homicides centered in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park, but extending to the wider San Francisco Bay Area. The gang and its elements have been directly involved in 12 homicides, 30 violent felonies, 25 violent misdemeanors, and 80 non-violent misdemeanors since 2002. Members of the gang are believed to have trafficked in methamphetamine, cocaine, crack cocaine, ecstasy, and marijuana in order to finance their weapons transactions.

An increase in violence caught the attention of Menlo Park Police and federal law enforcement, and in 2007, Menlo Park and the FBI began an 18-month investigation into the activities of the Taliban gang, culminating in the multi-city takedown.

Menlo Park Police Chief Bruce Goitia indicated the suspects were all considered high level targets whose removal from the community would improve safety for years to come.

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Realizing the vision for El Camino and Downtown



Menlo Park is developing a long-term plan for the El Camino Real and Downtown areas. A visioning process, held last summer, is leading to the preparation of a Specific Plan, which is currently underway. Environmental and fiscal review will be integrated into this part of the process, so that potential benefits (such as tax revenue) and impacts (such as traffic) of different scenarios will be considered. The completed Specific Plan will contain elements such as detailed land use regulations, design guidelines, infrastructure plans, and implementation measures.

Broad public outreach and participation continue to be a key element of the project. Like the visioning phase of the process that resulted in community consensus on 12 broad goals for the area, this phase will continue engaging a wide range of community members. An important part of ensuring that many people are involved is the Oversight and Outreach Committee. This group of residents and other stakeholders is

charged with providing advisory input and recommendations regarding the outreach process, and reaching out to other community members to engage them in the Community Workshops and other activities. The Committee's 18 members are appointed either by designated groups (such as a City Commission) or by the City Council in an effort to get a balance of interests and to create a setting in which all voices are heard.

According to Menlo Park Community Development Director Arlinda Heineck, the project is currently in the "Existing Conditions Analysis and Vision Refinement" stage. "We have a great vision for downtown from our Phase I visioning process. It is now time to move the vision into reality," said Ms. Heineck. At a community workshop on April 16th, residents looked beyond the goals to understand existing opportunities and constraints and the inherent trade-offs (e.g. traffic/parking and pedestrian space) when considering a vibrant downtown appropriate for Menlo Park. Over 100 residents and other stakeholders attended the meeting and worked together to help formulate alternatives for new buildings, uses and public amenities. These alternatives will be considered at a second open community workshop scheduled for June 18th. The June

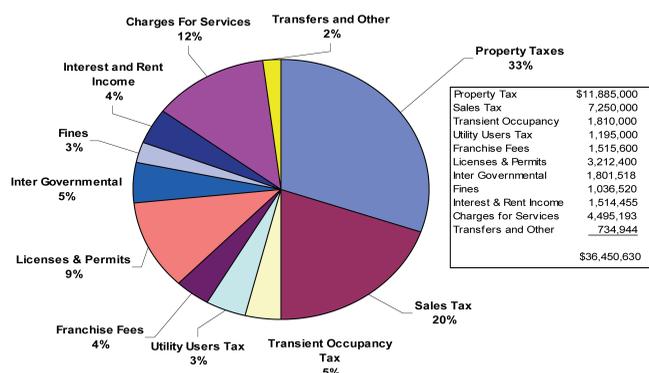
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Balancing long- and short-term needs in next year's budget

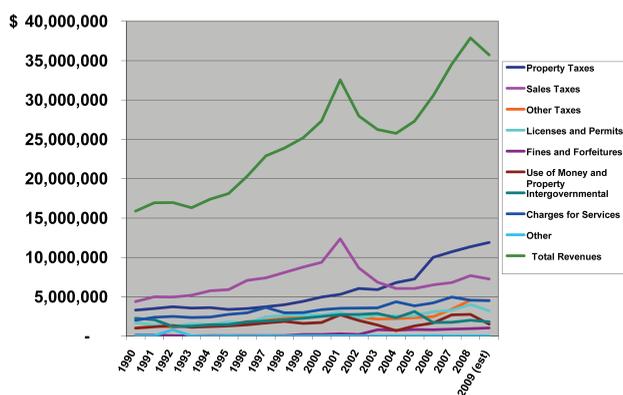
Each year in June, the City of Menlo Park adopts a budget plan that guides spending for the wide variety of City services provided to community residents and businesses. The budget includes funding for daily operations and basic services such as police, streets maintenance, library operations, community development and more. Other services, such as garbage and below-market rate housing, are all paid for by user fees or dedicated revenues and are not covered in this article.

Revenues

The budget process always begins with estimates of revenues for the coming year. The City receives only a small portion of the property taxes, sales taxes and other taxes you pay. The majority of taxes fund general County services, special districts, state agencies, regional school districts and community colleges. Menlo Park receives about 12 cents for every dollar in property taxes and 1 cent for every dollar of retail sales made in Menlo Park (every penny counts). The chart below shows where Menlo Park's revenues are coming from at the mid point of 2008-09. For the coming fiscal year, we estimate we will collect about \$37 million in general revenues and a total of about \$81 million from all funds we use to provide City services.



Revenues are extremely hard to predict. The chart below shows the changes in Menlo Park's revenues over the years. Note the huge drop in sales taxes after the dotcom bust in 2002 followed by the loss of the auto dealerships on El Camino. Fortunately, property values in Menlo Park have continued to increase, even during the current economic downturn, keeping our revenues fairly stable overall.



Expenses

The process of budgeting for 2009-2010 expenses actually started in December 2008 when Council began work on their goals for the year, helping departments determine priority areas and providing direction for our volunteer-led Commissions as they developed recommendations for project priorities. Council approved this list of projects at the March 24 meeting and Departments then began allocating costs related to these projects.

We are also currently working to estimate expenses for all ongoing operations and identify potential reductions wherever possible. This is extremely challenging because many organizational efficiencies were already achieved during the dotcom bust between 2002 and 2005. During that time, over \$4 million was slashed from the City's budget, including 35 staff positions. Additional strategies for net cost reductions reduced the budget by another \$1.5 million in 2006-2007. This means there are few low-hanging fruits, no more easy answers or obvious places where staff can identify savings, so impacts of each possibility for savings must be carefully considered. We are reviewing efficiencies such as energy savings, reduction in purchases of certain supplies, outsourcing where appropriate, and changes in staffing that don't significantly impact the City's ability to deliver quality services.

We are also reviewing all vacancies as they occur and determining where temporary freezes might allow savings with minimal impacts to services. We continue to take a longer term, planned approach to anticipated vacancies provided by a number of upcoming potential retirements, which may allow for a reduction in staffing through restructuring. Such opportunities might include, for example, elimination of a supervisor position by reassigning some duties, or combining the work of two positions into one with a more general job description, or utilizing technology to streamline processes now done manually, or eliminating services that no longer add value.

Developing the City's budget is a complex process that includes City Council review and approval as we work together to maintain a focus on services to you, the resident. For more information about the City's budget process, see the link to the city's budget page at: www.menlopark.org.

Going Green - Menlo Park Senior Center

After much preparation and planning, The Menlo Park Senior Center's weekly Second Harvest Brown Bag program has become GREEN! Previously, each week more than 130 brown bags were used for the program. Now, we are celebrating our fourth month of using re-usable bags. That is a savings of over 520 bags a month! To reduce waste, the program also has changed its format to a farmers' market style, where the seniors can choose the items they would like to take, rather than taking already prepared bags of food. This not only has cut back on the food waste, it has empowered the seniors to take charge and choose what they would use most at their homes. It has been a win-win situation for all!

Other Menlo Park Senior Center facts...

- Over 4,550 people participated in Senior Center activities last year
- 2,100 meals were served to seniors in the past year
- 1,800 rides were provided by our Senior Center Van in the past year
- 1,690 Brown Bags were distributed to needy seniors
- 105 seniors received free health screenings
- Over 250 patrons visited the Farmers' Market
- An average of 15 seniors receive weekly support through our Senior Peer Counseling program
- 880 participants benefited from the Senior Center's many free exercise programs this past year.

For more information about the Menlo Park Senior Center, contact Avidah Samardar at 330-2283.

New Burgess Gymnasium takes shape



Great strides are being made on finalizing the plans for the new Burgess Gymnasium. The draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) was published in early April, and was reviewed by the Planning Commission at a public hearing on May 4. Members of the public are invited to review the document online at www.menlopark.org (follow the links to the Capital Improvement Program, then Burgess Gymnasium and Gymnastics Center page). Copies are also available at the Menlo Park Library. Comments on the EIR can be submitted in writing through May 26.

Architectural plans for the gym are also being developed, and are scheduled for presentation to the Planning Commission in July. The new facilities, made possible by a generous grant from John Arrillaga, will feature green building technology including solar panels, water conserving plumbing fixtures and stormwater detention and treatment. Interested parties are encouraged to subscribe to the update feature on the project website to watch our progress.

You can also support the building of the new gym when Measure T bonds become available, see story on page 4.

Green your life, green your business at the library



What's greener than sharing books and ideas with your fellow citizens?

If you, like Kermit the Frog, find that "It's not easy being green," head over to the Menlo Park Library and check out the new Green Living collection. We've got books on sustainable landscaping, renewable energy for the home, environmentally friendly cleaning and remodeling, eco-travel, savvy shopping, organic gardening, biofuels, recycling and reusing, even "50 Green Projects for the Evil Genius." All free with your library card (and what could be greener than that?!)

Business Development Update

During tight budget times generating increased revenues to support our high quality services becomes even more important. Fortunately, Menlo Park has a formal Business Development Plan focused on growing city revenue. The plan has generated much recent activity, including:



- The Rosewood Sand Hill Hotel and Spa opened on April 2, and includes new jobs for over 250 people, 30 of them Menlo Park residents hired at a job fair co-hosted by the City. The hotel is projected to raise over \$1 million in transient occupancy tax when it is fully functioning.
- Amici's Restaurant (NY style pizza) on Santa Cruz Avenue, scheduled to open the second week in May, brings another selection to our downtown restaurants and adds significantly to the City's downtown brand as a dining destination.
- Tesla Motors has increased its auto delivery schedule from 30 cars a month to 120.
- The public review process for the proposed Marriott Hotel and Office Complex was discussed and finalized by Council at their April 14 meeting, moving us closer to a possible 280 room hotel and major office complex on underdeveloped property east of highway 101.
- Peet's Coffee reopened only two weeks after a devastating 4-alarm fire in their building, keeping an important downtown destination vibrant and thriving.
- Council recently approved an overall planning direction for another area of focus -- our "M2" light industrial zone east of highway 101, which generates the bulk of our sales tax revenue and has the potential to become home to a large number of high tech, green tech and bioscience businesses.

For more information about the City's Business Development efforts, contact David Johnson at djohnson@menlopark.org.

High Speed Rail collaboration will ensure Peninsula voices are heard

Proposition 1A passed in November, authorizing \$9.95 billion in bond funds to plan and build the California High Speed Rail Project (HSR) to construct an 800 mile high speed train system between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The currently designated route for the HSR from the Central Valley to San Francisco utilizes the Pacheco Pass through San Jose and up the Peninsula along the Caltrain corridor. The Bay Area to Central Valley Final Program Environmental Impact Report (EIR), approved in July 2008, identified stations for the HSR in San Francisco, San Jose, and Millbrae with an optional mid-peninsula station in either Palo Alto or Redwood City.

Before Prop 1A passed, City Councils in Menlo Park and Atherton joined in a lawsuit challenging the EIR results for the proposed Central Valley to Bay Area segment, alleging that alternative routes were not thoroughly evaluated and that Peninsula communities would suffer significant adverse impacts without any direct benefit from the project. Now that the concept of HSR and all the potential benefit it can bring has been approved by California voters, it's clear that the hard costs, land use impacts, and other disruptions resulting from track expansions, grade separations, noise, and construction over the next ten-plus years is creating concerns for Peninsula communities.

Thanks to the initial efforts of Council members from Menlo Park, Palo Alto and Atherton, a collaborative effort to come together to address impacts of HSR is taking shape. Although the long term results of the collaboration are yet to be seen, the effort is beginning with a simple written agreement designed to establish the group as a formal body with a common purpose and collective interests, define the roles of the communities, setup a voting structure and process, and set the scope of the group's work as a lobbying body. Another early task of the new group has been to draft a joint letter designed to create a group that would be recognized by the State in considering design options and discussing potential impacts.

According to Menlo Park City Manager Glen Rojas, the newly formed collaboration hopes to ensure that the changes caused to Peninsula communities by the trains take into account the needs of residents.

"HSR is a major issue with the potential to impact all communities in California, not just those along the route," said Mr. Rojas. "Experience shows us that collaboration is the only way we can hope to address the impacts in a positive way."

For more information about the HSR or the collaboration, contact Kent Steffens at ksteffens@menlopark.org.

New Project Priorities focus on long term maintenance and needs for more sports facilities

The Menlo Park City Council approved a series of projects for the fiscal year beginning July 1 supporting long-term cost decreases by reducing ongoing maintenance of antiquated facilities. New projects also help address long-standing community needs for increased recreation facilities. \$18.8 million is now set aside for 25 projects. The bulk of the money, \$17.2 million, will go toward four major efforts: the construction of a new gymnasium at Burgess Park, renovations at Kelly Park, street resurfacing, and a new water pump station in Sharon Heights.

Funding for the majority of the projects comes from funds outside the city's general budget operations, from such things as water usage rates, redevelopment agency funds, bond measures, and cash for mitigation efforts from development projects. In addition to the 24 new projects, work will continue through the next year on 39 projects that had been previously funded as well as work on a 5-year plan.

According to Public Works Director Kent Steffens, many of the approved projects are urgently needed, even in uncertain economic times. "The city is behind in street resurfacing and streets cost more to rebuild the longer we wait; the Sharon Heights pump station is very old and not reliable; and the city's water supply is being threatened by an aging reservoir roof," Mr. Steffens said. "Delaying these projects will only cost the city more in the long term, and might cause safety hazards in some cases. Additionally, with little local construction currently underway, we can save money through increased competition for contracts."

For more information about the City's project priorities, see the web site under Project Pages at www.menlopark.org.

Time to update Menlo Park's Redevelopment Area Plan



Redevelopment areas (RDAs) were created to assist communities with eliminating blight in a designated area and to promote private investment and development. RDAs also focus attention and financial investment in an area to create jobs, revitalize businesses, rehab and add to housing stock and reverse deteriorating trends.

RDAs work through state law allowing a City with a qualified area to create a method of funding called "tax

increment financing" which works when a City Council approves a redevelopment plan. At that point in time, the tax values of property within the boundaries of the RDA are calculated and any increases in value (the increment) become available to reinvest into that area. When this happens, other taxing agencies (like the State) lose part of the new property taxes generated by redevelopment but continue to receive base revenues and non property-tax revenues.

The City of Menlo Park adopted the initial Las Pulgas Community Development Plan for the Belle Haven area and nearby commercial district in 1981. Since 2001, over \$31 million worth of capital projects have been completed in the area, plus roughly \$1,000,000 annually of support to ongoing programs. Projects completed through the RDA funding include: the Gateway Apartments, the Belle Haven Child Development Center, Ivy Drive plaza, Willow Corners development, Belle Haven Branch library, Onetta Harris Community Center and Senior Center, various road and streetscape improvements, Hamilton Park and area housing, and more.

Redevelopment Implementation Plans are created every five years to make sure activities and projects in the RDA are addressing current issues and needs. Menlo Park's plan expires in December 2009, so staff are currently designing a community process to ensure that the update incorporates new ideas and priorities important to the neighborhood and area business and commercial property owners.

Community meetings as well as meetings with business and property owners were held in late April and early May in order to get community input. Initial ideas for projects included: streetscapes on O'Brien Drive, street resurfacing in the Belle Haven neighborhood, sidewalks on Willow Road and other streets in the area and more. The next step in the process will be to narrow the brainstormed list from the community according to criteria required by the State, as well as funding that is available, and then bring a draft plan back to the community for final review at a second round of community meetings on May 13 (7pm at the Menlo Park Senior Center, 100 Terminal Ave.).

For more information about how to get involved in the RDA plan update process, contact David Johnson at drjohnson@menlopark.org.

Second Measure T bond issuance allows you to invest in our City's parks



In 2001 almost 70% of Menlo Park voters approved the "Measure T" ballot, providing for up to \$38 million to renovate and expand City parks and recreation facilities. Phased in over many years, the first bond issuance (totaling about \$13.2 million) provided for improvements to Burgess Park, Nealon Park, Burgess Pool and locker rooms, and the Menlo Children's Center, among others.

After a series of community meetings in January 2007, the

Parks and Recreation Commission recommended a second phase for Measure T that would provide for the new Burgess Gym, the Gymnastics Center, the Burgess Recreation Center, various playing fields and other projects. The City's financial advisors believe that now is a great time to finance bonds for the second phase of the Measure T program as there is currently a strong market for high grade municipal bonds (and Menlo Park currently has a AAA bond rating).

On March 31, the Menlo Park City Council was presented with the next steps needed for the second issuance of these bonds, including a credit and ratings review for the City, and approval of financing documents and bond pre-pricing in mid June. Members of the community will be provided the opportunity of purchasing these bonds. The bonds will be available on July 1, 2009, just in time to support the construction of the new Burgess Gym along with funds donated by a local source (see the story about the new Gym on page 2). There will be information on the City's web page regarding the sale when details become available. For more information about the bond sale, call Carol Augustine, Finance Director at 650.330.6645.

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Dedication of Bedwell-Bayfront Park at Kite Day!



On Sunday, April 26, 2009, the formal dedication and renaming of Bayfront Park to Bedwell – Bayfront Park was held. Michael Bedwell was the City Manager of Menlo Park from 1964 to 1991. During this time he played an integral role in the conversion of the old Marsh Road landfill (located at the end of Marsh Road and Bayfront

Expressway) into Menlo Park's largest open space. Over the years the park has attracted numerous wildlife species and continues to be enjoyed by families and individuals for walking, running, bicycling, dog walking, bird watching, photography, orienteering, and picnicking.

For the past 20 years, residents have celebrated the original opening of the park with a Kite Day Event, which is always scheduled near Earth Day. This year's event also included a new park sign featuring the new name, and story boards sharing the story of Mr. Bedwell's vision of taking an old landfill and making it into a natural park for generations of Menlo Park residents to enjoy.

Over 1250 people participated in the dedication, and over 1000 kites filled the sky for Kite Day! For more information on future Community Services events and activities, contact Katrina Whitaker at 650.330.2204 or KatrinaWhitaker@menlopark.org.

Law enforcement

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"I am extremely proud of the work done by the Menlo Park Police Department," Chief Goitia said at a news conference the day of the raids. "Not only did we participate in the initial investigative work resulting in over 30 warrants for these suspects, but our Commander Lacey Burt was the incident commander responsible for running the entire operation and Commander Sylvia Moir coordinated the arrest processing for all 40 suspects who were handled right here at the Menlo Park Police Department. No suspects or officers were hurt during the operation; we couldn't have asked for a better result."

Most suspects have been charged with federal weapons and drug possession charges, which carry higher mandatory sentences than state laws. "The goal of the operation was to restore neighborhood safety and quality of life, and reduce criminal activity and gang violence in east Menlo Park and East Palo Alto," said Chief Goitia. "This safe and successful large scale operation shows how serious we are about a long term approach to decreasing crime and enhancing community safety, and we appreciate the support from City Council and other staff for this effort."

For more information about the gang sweep, contact Sgt Eric Cowans at the Menlo Park Police Department at escowans@menlopark.org.

Vision

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18th workshop will be followed by a workshop on September 17th focusing on a preferred plan for downtown, resulting in a Specific Plan for the area. The Specific Plan will set the direction for downtown Menlo Park and El Camino Real for the next 50 years.

For more information about the El Camino Real Downtown Specific Plan process, contact Thomas Rogers, Associate Planner, at 650.330.6722 or throgers@menlopark.org. Or, visit the project web page at www.menlopark.org/projects/comdev_ecrdowntown.htm.

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Editor: Community Engagement Manager Cherise Brandell

Email: cebrandell@menlopark.org Telephone: 650.330.6618

Design & layout: Graffik Dezine 650.493.4383