



2022 MAY newsletter

Via Zoom May General Meeting

Monday, May 23,
7:00 p.m.

Hybrid City Council

May 24, 3 p.m.
Budget Workshop

May 24, after 6 p.m.
Flood Channel Repair?

In-Person

June Board Meeting

Saturday, June 4,
9 a.m.
Home of
Ann Chrstoph

Katrina Foley, Candidate for Supervisor, to Speak May 23

At our next general meeting, candidate for Orange County supervisor Katrina Foley will join us. Elected supervisor for the Second District last year, she is running in the Fifth District (ours) in June, where she would replace Lisa Bartlett (who is running for Congress). Before becoming a supervisor she served for 12 years on the Costa Mesa City Council and was its first directly elected mayor. We look forward to hearing her concerns about the County and sharing ours. We'll assemble via Zoom on Monday, May 23, at 7 p.m. The link will be on our website on the day.

Establishment of a Housing Fund To Be Part of Budget Discussions

Pointing to the residents' survey results showing concern about the lack of affordable housing, the state's current focus on housing, and our Housing and Human Services Committee's increasing expertise on the subject, George Weiss suggested last month that the Council

discuss setting up a fund to support the construction of affordable housing. The idea met with general approval, and Bob Whalen will work with George and committee members to identify possible sources of funds in preparation for the budget workshop on May 24.

Game Changer for the Garden Park?

The South Laguna Community Garden Park planning committee reports that, after years of silence in response to inquiries, the Saudi owners of the property are finally interested in selling it and that the committee continues to be dedicated to pursuing its acquisition. Describing the garden as precious now and destined to be even more so as the years go by as a place for growing gardens, friendships, and community, the committee has asked the City Council to restore the \$500,000 pledge it rescinded in January and calling for donations and pledges to add to the similar amount it has assembled in anticipation of making an offer. To donate and for information on how to help in other ways, visit the committee's website at southlaguna.org/garden/.

City Council Prepares to Lease Church Lot for Parking Structure

In a surprise move that, we now learn, has been in the works behind closed doors since 2019, the City Council voted (3–2, with Iseman and Weiss opposed) last week to proceed with leasing the Presbyterian Church parking lot to build a parking structure downtown. Justifying the secrecy as “normal Council behavior” and the violation of General Plan policy as “what residents have said they want,” Council members are getting ready to build a structure that would add 92 public spaces available free to residents with a shoppers’ permit, while a level described as “semi-subterranean” would provide 41 spaces to the church for its exclusive use. (The 92 spaces would be just a handful more than the number in the downtown that the Council has chosen to use in other ways in the past few years.) The City will make a one-time payment of \$1,980,000 in rent within six months of executing the lease (to be returned if the project doesn’t go forward) and then pay a proportion of the gross revenue in rent annually once the structure is completed. An estimated \$10–12 million will be required to build the structure. At the end of the 53-year term of the lease, opponents calculate, the City will have paid \$22 million and the church will own the structure.

The positive public comment came largely from members of the church. The dozen or so opponents in the Chambers and online pointed to (1) the irregularity of the process and the apparent inappropriate use of closed sessions to make development plans; (2) the high cost of building on borrowed land; (3) the fact that the just-adopted Downtown Specific Plan stresses parking management and omits any mention of a parking structure, viewing parking areas as “posing potentially negative impacts by virtue of their design and appearance” and having the “potential to worsen traffic congestion”; (4) the proposed destruction of a historic structure on the site; and (5) the absence of any environmental review (of traffic congestion and safety on Third Street, for example, and of the possibility of constraints due to a high water table that prevented underground parking across the street at the Susi Q Center). Village Laguna’s own contributions were incomplete; our letters failed to reach the Councilmembers beforehand

because of technical difficulties at City Hall and not all of our phone callers were given the opportunity to speak. Members can visit the website to read everything we would have said. The one apparent concession to the dismay over the proposal was Bob Whalen’s adding to the motion that the lease come back to the Council for final approval.

Strategic Planning Session Adds to List of City Projects

This year’s City Council strategic planning session added five new projects—one for each Council member—to the list for staff to work on: a community risk assessment and “standards of cover” for disaster response (SK), a funding plan for Laguna Canyon Road improvements (BW), increased funding for police to address street crime behavior from unsheltered individuals (PB), consideration of alternative site for Fire Station 4 (TI), and (5) developing a CEQA-certified climate action plan (GW).

Another eleven projects were identified to be addressed when resources become available: obtain additional grant funding (SK, BW, TI), add enclosed towers for Marine Safety (PB, GW), implement continued improvement in Community Development (PB), develop workforce investment initiatives/executive team recommendations (SK, BW), finalize parking master plan (SK, BW), develop senior/affordable housing (BW, GW), map watercourses (TI, GW), address noise issues (TI), develop a commercial-area beautification/maintenance ordinance, evaluate IT infrastructure and cybersecurity (GW), and upgrade police, fire, and community services (PB).

The staff report for the March 29 meeting also includes the status and likely completion dates for all the rest of the City’s ongoing projects. One project that Village Laguna has been following, the restoration of the digester tower at the Village Entrance, is linked to “Downtown Parking Structure” and marked “to be determined.” Both the housing-related part, Phase 2, of the Downtown Specific Plan revision and the Downtown Action Plan (the one that threatens all the downtown trees) are labeled “on hold.” A possible analysis relevant to community-choice energy has a completion date of 12/13/2022.

**April Meeting with Architects
Sheds Light on Plan Process**



Longtime local architects Morris Skendarian and James Henry came to our in-person April meeting to tell us about building houses in Laguna Beach. Morris has practiced in Laguna for over forty years, building or renovating hundreds of homes and businesses including the Old Pottery Place, The Ranch at Laguna Beach, and The Collection. James Ward Henry II’s architectural studies began while he was working for his father, the well-known Laguna Beach architect Jim Henry, and he is experienced in contemporary and traditional design and historic restoration. Morris and James explained that the zoning plan check that pre-

cedes scheduling for design review includes a site survey, a boundary survey, preparation of a landscaping plan, and historical evaluation if applicable and usually takes months, and right now staff is running behind. Morris quipped: “If you’re building a five-bedroom house for your teenagers, they’ll be off to college when you finish and maybe you won’t need such a big house.”

The reasons, they said, include the complete change of staff in the Community Development Department, from the director on down, and the change in city management, staff working from home under COVID restrictions, the flood of applications produced by house flipping, short-term rentals, and the construction of accessory dwelling units, and the complexity of the ordinances that new staff is dealing with. Asked what might help reduce the backlog, they mentioned maybe being able to make small corrections at the counter and revising the fees to reward complete submissions. The solution, Morris said, is certainly not getting rid of design review: “Without it we’d lose what we love about Laguna Beach. All the cottages would be replaced with houses without regard for neighborhood character. We’d become like Newport or Dana Point. Look at Corona del Mar and at the flower streets. Most of the small cottages are gone, and large box structures have replaced them, filling the envelope, windows looking into each other. The character is gone.”

Renew your membership

Name(s) _____

Address _____

Phone Number _____ **Email** _____

I have enclosed my check for the following membership. I understand the amount is not tax-deductible.

- Student \$20
- Basic \$40/individual, \$60/family
- Supporter \$150/family
- Please send the newsletter by email
- Sustainer \$250/family
- Preservationist \$500/family
- Villager Extraordinaire (\$1,000+)*

* Includes two Charm House Tour tickets

Contact Treasurer Mary Ives at mives314@gmail.com to arrange for automatic monthly/quarterly payments.

Mail to: Village Laguna PO Box 1309 Laguna Beach CA 92652



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FIRST CLASS MAIL

News Briefs

1–The City has leased the parking lot against the hillside on Coast Highway across from the Montages Resort, formerly leased by the hotel from the mobile home park above it, for use as public parking.

2–A 48-unit affordable housing project is under development for the parking lot behind the Congregational Church on St. Ann’s Drive, with the result that the parking spaces there that are designated to satisfy the requirements at the new 150-seat Chinese restaurant on South Coast Highway (at Sleepy Hollow) are going to be only temporary. The latter project, which lost its grandfathered parking through a difference of interpretation of “major remodel” between the City and the Coastal Commission, was approved by the Council with a parking variance on the condition that 52 spaces of offsite parking be provided for guests and 30 spaces for employees and a parking management plan return to the Council for approval before the building can be occupied.

3–If the tentative agenda for May 24 holds up, the Council may be discussing the Orange County Flood Control District’s plans for the repair of the channel that night. The issue here is the removal of a number of trees near the channel and the demolition of the frontage road mini-park. Check the agenda on the City’s website on Thursday, May 19, to see whether May 24 is going to be the time to express your views.

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