

Brisbane weighs council term reform backlash: Officials consider election shift while examining transformative development

By Austin Walsh Daily Journal Staff Apr 27, 2017

Brisbane officials facing community backlash must reconsider their decision to tweak term limits and questions linger over how the issue may influence a transformative development proposal along the city's Baylands.

Following a residential referendum on a previous approval to extend their own terms, the Brisbane City Council will revisit the best way to align their election schedule with the state calendar.

Councilmembers are slated to discuss Thursday, April 27, seeking three- or five-year terms in the coming fall election after residents rejected an earlier decision to lengthen terms.

Residents last month collected and filed with county Elections officials the requisite signatures making councilmembers reconsider their decision to lengthen terms by six months. Councilmembers may accept the referendum, or reject it and force a fall election on the issue.

Councilman Cliff Lentz said since the hands of officials have been effectively forced, they should accept the outcome and begin looking ahead.

"I don't think there really is a position to take except that the community has spoken and we need to listen to that direction and hold the council election in 2017," he said.

The requirement to shift election years is generated by a recent bill forcing cities experiencing low voter turnout during odd year elections to align their schedule with the state.

Lentz said he believes residents would not have taken issue with council term lengths if not for the transformative development proposed along the city's Baylands.

"If the Baylands wasn't before the council, I don't think there would have been a discussion," he said.

Councilmembers are in the process of examining a proposal by Universal Paragon Corporation to build 4,000 new homes, almost 7 million square feet of commercial space and a variety of additional amenities on a 660-acre site hugging the San Mateo and San Francisco county line.

Officials are in the process of studying the variety of potential impacts tied to the project and are planning to begin formally weighing the initiative with the intent of making a decision by the summer.

Mayor Lori Liu said she believed with a council election on the horizon, officials should move more quickly to make a decision on the Baylands proposal.

"We have said on the council that we are endeavoring to focus on the Baylands over the summer, and now that we know there will be an election in 2017, it is incumbent on the council to make sure that process doesn't get delayed and can move forward as efficiently as possible," she said.

Liu and Lentz agreed the current council should strive to make a decision on the matter because they have worked as a unit through studying the variety of economic and environmental impacts tied to the project.

Officials have previously said following a council decision, residents will likely have an opportunity to vote on the Baylands proposal as well. Uncertainty remains over the sway a final vote may have though, said Lentz and Liu.

They agreed great attention will be given during summer deliberations to hashing out the details of any ballot measure eventually passed along to voters.

“The policy of the council is that we will put the Baylands to a public vote and it is up to the discussion of the council over what that would look like and what we will be asking the voters,” said Liu.

Lentz said the scope of influence the vote could swing between merely advisory on the council’s final decision or ultimately have the power to approve or reject the proposal.

Considering the influence the project, Liu said officials will give considerable care over the coming months to crafting and presenting a vision they believe is most suitable for Brisbane and the region.

“It is one of the most important potential projects in the Bay Area,” she said. “It has local and regional ramifications and a potential for us to be a role model in terms of development. As for what that development will look like, we will certainly have a discussion with the rest of the council.”

The Brisbane City Council meets 7:30 p.m. Thursday, April 27, at Brisbane City Hall, 50 Park Place.

austin@smdailyjournal.com

(650) 344-5200 ext. 105