Welcome to the 20th KZGN News Talking Points Editorial

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By: Tom Wiknich

Today’s topic will be: New Ridgecrest Measure L Committee Starts Up

At last week’s city council meeting, the council filled two vacancies on the Measure l committee. Yesterday evening, the two new members joined the existing three members. They met yesterday, Monday evening at 5:30 at city hall. The meeting was kind of lengthy because there was a lot of information provided to bring the new members up to speed.

First, let me explain what the Measure l committee is and what their responsibility is. About 2½ years ago, the voters approved a 5-year sales tax increase of 0.75% on sales in Ridgecrest. This is a tax with a 5-year sunset clause. The initiative was passed under the promise of the council at that time, promising to spend the funds on public safety (police) and repairing streets.

The Measure l oversight committee was established in the initiative as a citizen group of five people to monitor the city council spending of these funds. They are to provide a report to the people of Ridgecrest annually, in March, telling us how much funding was received, and how the funds were spent by the city council. This committee has no authority to decide how the funds are spent. They are only to report to us how the funds were spent. Last evening, they started getting ready to report to us the fund spending for budget year 2013-2014. Finance Manager Mrs. McQuiston, Chief Strand and City Manager Dennis Speer provided data and information to the committee members to include in their annual report. This was a lengthy discussion. This extra tax generates approximately an additional $2.5 million in revenue for the city every year. That’s a lot of money. Without this 0.75% sales tax, we wouldn’t get that $2.5 million. Last year the report was about 100 pages, quite detailed, and hard to follow. This is not a criticism of the report, there was a lot of data generated for the first time. It took a lot of data to fully explain to the people the budget process, and how Measure l fits into the city’s budget. This new committee is striving to reduce the complexity of the report. They are going to try and make it simpler to read and understand. The committee established a 2-person subcommittee to meet with the finance manager to get and verify all the financial data to be included in the report. They’ll be meeting soon and expected to provide a draft report to the whole committee by Monday, February 23rd. They plan on meeting that evening to give the whole committee the report for review. It should be a lengthy meeting because the report could be quite long. I’m sure the whole committee will want to be confident as to what is in the report. At their meeting last night, I reminded the new members that lacking an independent auditor looking at the numbers, we, the people, see them as the auditor.

We expect that when they put the final report out that they are ready to stand behind the report as being accurate. That they shouldn’t just take some numbers from a spreadsheet the city provides, but examine and verify the numbers. At their March 9th meeting, they should finalize the report. Then soon to follow, they’ll present their final report publically at a regular council meeting. I wouldn’t be surprised to see that step done at the city council meeting on March 18th, but that is not yet set in stone.

The entire committee believes this tax is important to the city. They also want to embark on a public outreach of their findings. They plan on not just doing a public report, but to reach out with presentations to the people via service club presentations. KZGN TV will be hosting the committee at a future segment on Ridgecrest Talk.

We’ll let you know when that date is set.

This job the members volunteered to do for us is not an easy task. They have to be very detail oriented, and budget savvy. From my perspective they all take this job very seriously, and strive to do a good job. If the city hopes to have this sales tax renewed by us at the end of 5 years, the council needs to follow the promise of keeping spending on public safety and roads.

It’s in their hands. And it’s up to the Measure l committee to watch them for us.

In conclusion, I encourage the members of the Measure l committee to follow President Reagan’s words of wisdom, “Trust but verify.” Accept the data from the city.

But………….then verify the numbers. Your job is important. You are our eyes on the city. We look forward to your report. I want to remind everyone that these meetings are open to the public. Anyone is free to attend these meetings.

And that’s today editorial. Tell me what you think! Whether you agree with me or not, I’d like to read your comments. I encourage your email comments. Please email them to info@kzgn.net.

This has been a KZGN Talking Points Editorial. Join me next Thursday for my next editorial. Thanks for watching. I’m Tom Wiknich, and that’s what I think!