

Healdsburg Tribune, January 29, 2020

Commentary

A confused and confusing city council

COMMENTARY — On Jan. 21, the Healdsburg City Council met to consider a \$7 million donation from the Foley Family Foundation to build the approved community space, performance center and farmers market at 3 North. Over 100 citizens attended, and many walked away embarrassed and dismayed by our elected's performance. Based on a show of hands, an overwhelming majority was eager to embrace this unique and generous offer and was excited to see the city finally move forward with a project that was years in the planning and adopted by council in 2017, but lacked funding. All with virtually no strings attached.

What could possibly go wrong?

Well, with our city council, we never know. As people left chambers, many were visibly shaken. To the disappointment of the Foley family and the community, the council showed little gratitude; instead the council members engaged in a confused and confusing debate. Talk swirled around a SMART train stop (even though the train might never reach the town) and, all of a sudden, they pondered doing a Master Plan (which SDAT/Healdsburg 2040 has advocated for over 18 months). Council even had the temerity to consider an alternative use of the donation, the height of arrogance and ignorance.

Councilmember Shaun McCaffery's comparison of a potential \$20 million valuation of a housing project with a \$7 million gift was comparing the tax refund to a gold nugget. This seemed ludicrous given that 2019 city tax revenue came in significantly below budget and other quality of life projects were once again pushed back. Let's be clear: the city doesn't have the funds to develop 3 North.

The Foley Foundation saw a strong conceptual design, which ties city hall, Shed and the farmers market together with the Plaza. It would honor the agricultural roots of the city. Further, it has the potential to spark a new wave of philanthropic support for other major projects. Placing this project at 3 North provides the greatest reward for the entire community and is exactly what previous city council discussions focused on.

That's why Healdsburg 2040 put the preservation of our historical legacy at the top of our Strategic Plan proposal. Unfortunately the council rejected that and adopted a Strategic Plan which lacks any overarching vision or meaningful metrics.

The development of 3 North as a community space, performance center and farmers market doesn't neglect the affordable housing needs. There are numerous other locations for affordable housing. Aside from developing the property at 155 Dry Creek the city should consider converting the city-owned parking areas to the north of city hall and other locations around the city. There are underutilized properties to the west of Grove Street and along Healdsburg Avenue, as well as the old train depot area, which may be accessed through a "swap" for an alternative station location.

We strongly support affordable housing, just not at 3 North. We currently have over 400 affordable units. However, the study presented last week indicated we may need two to three times more units going forward. It is hard to imagine how to build an additional 800 to 1200 units during the cycle beginning in 2023. It would be helpful to see the data behind that projection.

What now? Council should immediately direct the mayor, accompanied by Parks and Community Director Mark Themig (who brokered the deal with the donor), to meet with the Foley Foundation and finalize a deal within 30 days.

Council members would show that they are responsive to residents, fiscally responsible and serious about achieving their Strategic Plan goals, including their statement of intent that the city “seeks to prioritize public input and places a high value on proactive communications and meaningful engagement with all residents and businesses”.

Healdsburg 2040 is grateful to the Foley Family Foundation and excited about the opportunity to bring this priority project to fruition.

Healdsburg 2040 is a group of interested citizens advising the city on the implementation of the SDAT report.