

BETTER BERKELEY TIMES

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THERE'S SOMETHING ON OUR MIND

This newsletter is brought to you by your Berkeley neighbors. Some of us have lived in Berkeley for a long time. Others just moved here. Most of us are trying to carve out a healthy, happy and safe quality of life in the city we love. And all of us have something on our mind.

We've been asking ourselves:

- What direction is the city headed in?
- What decisions are being made that impact its citizens?
- How is the city spending our tax dollars?
- What can we do to change the trajectory of Berkeley's future?

We don't think these are easy questions to answer, but we know they are important ones. And we think some of you have these questions too. We cannot afford to just sit back and wait to see what happens. We are a group of citizens, who strive to research, question and understand how we can work together to make a Better Berkeley. We hope you will join us.

**What concerns you most about where Berkeley is headed?
Tell us at betterberkeleytimes@gmail.com or
www.betterberkeleytimes.com**



WEST BERKELEY, CA

OREGON, NEVADA & WASHINGTON MOVE TO BERKELEY

You've probably seen the RVs lined up along the Eastshore Highway and scattered across parts of West Berkeley. Have you ever looked at the license plates and seen a wide range of states represented? It might make you wonder why all these RVs are moving to Berkeley from out-of-state. Those who support RVs parked for days on end in these locations will tell you that the people living in the RVs have been pushed out of their housing because they can't afford the high rents in Berkeley. But some rudimentary digging and research shows that their inhabitants came to Berkeley because Berkeley provides services to the homeless that can't be beat.

That might be all well and fine - if we had the resources to take care of more than 1,000 homeless people in Berkeley. But we don't, and the problem just keeps growing. **The increased sanitation issues and multiple RV fires due to open flames has many in the neighborhood concerned.** City officials initially crafted an RV Parking Permit program that would allow RVs to park in neighborhoods across the city, for finite periods of time. Many months later, the idea was scrapped and replaced with a proposal to house an RV site where inhabitants of RVs could park overnight, connecting them with wrap around services in the hopes of finding them permanent housing.

In the meantime, the waste buckets overflow (severely impacting the water quality in Aquatic Park), and the threat of RV fires continues.

What is the estimated cost to build one unit of "affordable" housing in Berkeley?

- A. \$250,000
- B. \$500,000
- C. \$750,000
- D. \$1,000,000

Answer: C. According to nonprofit development companies like Satellite Affordable Housing and Bridge Housing, one unit of housing costs almost \$750,000 to produce.

Is There a Pathway to Helping the Homeless?

In 2017, City Council and Mayor Arreguin decided they need to "create new homeless programs and a 1,000 person plan to stem the tide of homelessness in Berkeley." That led to the Pathways Project - a program designed to provide short-term shelter (and ultimately) permanent housing for the growing homeless population.

The cost per year was estimated to be \$2.6m. Startup costs were in the same range, and the project was meant to house up to 50 individuals at a time. Who are the first participants of this program and how did they manage to secure one of the 50 open spots?

The Director's report shows that all participants were hand-selected, with most all 50 participants being high-functioning individuals that were already entitled to permanent subsidies based on disability. Left out of the equation was the hard to house, long-term homeless population who typically have no guaranteed housing subsidies. At a cost of \$56,000 per person to Berkeley voters, it's hard to understand if this program is worth it?

POTHOLES, SEWERS, & STREET LIGHTS, OH MY!

Does your ride home from an outing consist of trying to avoid dropping into major potholes? Have you ever noticed how unkempt the local park looks, or how few hours the public pool is open? Time and time again, Berkeley voters have been presented with ballot measures meant to improve the City's financial investment in its infrastructure. Tens of millions of dollars have been given to the City through both local and county bond measures – approved by the voters. **We are up to seven separate taxes that are collected from property owners to provide for the city's infrastructure upkeep.**

All those measures were intended to provide the much needed maintenance and upgrades for the city's streets, parks, pools, sewers and lighting. Yet the citizens of Berkeley continue to see increased deterioration of their roads and public facilities. Currently, the City's infrastructure liabilities were estimated at \$786 million. But even with the tax measures in place, funding sources for infrastructure are limited because 80% of all tax revenues are used to pay for City employees' salaries and benefits.



WHAT DOES YOUR PENSION LOOK LIKE?

For many of us, a pension is something our parents spoke about and worked hard for. In today's world, it's rare to find a job with a traditional pension. But if you're one of the lucky few who works for the City of Berkeley, you'll be set for a long time to come.

That's because by 2016, the City's unfunded liabilities for retirees topped \$640 million, and continues to grow each year. On top of that, the City continues to add new employees at an unknown future cost to the taxpayer. In a 2017 City Council meeting about the unfunded pension liabilities, the City Manager was unable to determine (nor explain) what the long-term cost of a Berkeley city employee is to the city's bottom line.

It's hard for us to even fathom how much money you'd have to save in your 401(k) to beat a Berkeley pension!

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What is the longest time period Berkeley residents have waited until a street was repaved?

- A. 8 years**
- B. 15 years**
- C. 25 years**
- D. More than 30 years**

D. Back when Mayor Arreguin was just 5 years old.

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PROPERTY TAXES & YOU

Do you have an unused basement, crawl space or attic? If so, the City of Berkeley may be overcharging you on your property tax bill. A recent review by a homeowner led to a discovery that the city was overcharging them for their six-foot crawlspace. It turns out the city has a history of taxing unlivable portions of homes such as crawl spaces, unfinished basements and unfinished attics. The municipal code specifically exempts these spaces from being taxed, but the city's Department of Finance has been doing it anyway.



It's not easy to figure out whether the city is overcharging you, as they keep the square footage they utilize to tax a homeowner, a secret. In any other county, a homeowner can publicly access the square footage of their home through the Tax Assessor's database. But in Berkeley, they don't use the Alameda County tax assessor's records - they use a "confidential" database to determine how to charge you and that square footage may not be equal to that of the County Assessor's office. Although a public record, it is difficult to get an answer from the city about the square footage used.

Do you have unused space in your home? The city may be overcharging you.

Want to find out if you're being overcharged? Call the city of Berkeley's Finance Department and ask them what square footage they are using to determine your property tax. Then contact the Alameda County Tax Assessor's office to ask the same question. If there is a difference between the two, there is a likelihood you are being overcharged.

ARE YOU CONCERNED ABOUT BERKELEY'S FUTURE?

Join
US!

We are a group of property owners, business owners, and concerned citizens. We want the best Berkeley possible and a good quality of life for all. Come learn more and join us in the fight for a better Berkeley!

www.betterberkeleytimes.com