

Johnson Gets Okay For Preventative Maintenance Approach To City Roads

Effort Also Aims To Urge Council Colleagues To Think Long Term On City Issues



Councilmember James Johnson contends that a preventative maintenance approach to city streets could save the city approximately \$30 million over the next 20 years. (Long Beach Business Journal photograph by Carlos Delgado)

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In an effort to potentially save the city \$30 million over the next 20 years, the Long Beach City Council approved an item set forth by 7th District Councilmember James Johnson to reallocate half of the city's funds for street repair to street maintenance.

Johnson brought the item to council on May 3, asking to have 50 percent of each district's residential street repair funding be used for preventative street maintenance, with the other half kept for street repaving or rebuilding. Johnson said his goal is to get the council to think long-term on city issues and prove to the public the council is properly using city funds to benefit the community.

"I really believe that we've got to figure out how to pay today's bills today," he said. "It's just plain wrong to push them down the road." The item was based on an audit done by City Auditor Laura Doud in 2008 of the city streets program. Johnson served as assistant city auditor before becoming a councilmember and in that position he was involved in that audit, which found that cities should be focusing on investing in preventative maintenance.

The council approved the item 9-0, and approved a subsequent item for a contract with Intermountain Slurry Seal, Inc. for the preventative maintenance of several streets. Intermountain offers three types of slurry seals, which are generally used for preventative maintenance of streets: sand seal, which is a fine aggregate mixture used to fill and seal cracks in low-density and low-traffic areas; slurry seal, which is

a general aggregate mixture used on moderate to heavy trafficked areas to correct raveling, oxidation, loss of matrix and improve skid resistance; and micro surfacing, which is a coarse aggregate used to correct severe surface conditions under heavy traffic.

According to Johnson, the City of Long Beach once had a program for preventative maintenance of streets in 1990s, but by about 2003 budget crises hit and the city stopped doing this kind of maintenance to save money. "Well, it is a way to save money in a short-term sense, but it costs so much more over the long term," Johnson noted. "I think what was a stop-gap measure just to get us through that one year became basically a permanent issue of deferring maintenance." Before this item, there was no citywide budget for street maintenance. Citywide street repair funding is \$3.1 million, divided between the nine council districts.

"What's happened is that basically cities across the country have seen deferring maintenance as a cost savings," Johnson said. "Any business owner will tell you that deferring maintenance is not a cost savings. In fact, you're multiplying your cost many times over – five, 10, 20 times the cost. You're just pushing it off a couple years, and so in these tough economic times I think the core challenge in this city has got to be financials – the budget." Though 4th District Councilmember Patrick O'Donnell said at the meeting that in the past, Long Beach Public Works was not interested in using slurry seal techniques on damaged roads, Johnson told the Business Journal that slurry seal is not appropriate for all streets.

The city's street rating system shows which streets are eligible for preventative measures such as slurry seal. The street rating system is from zero to 100, with perfect streets rated at 100. Streets with a rating between 70 and 100 are candidates for preventative maintenance, those with a 40 to 70 rating need repaving and any street rated less than 40 is a failed street. Failed streets have major rips and must be ripped out and replaced.

According to Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster, the information on which streets need maintenance and which need repaving or rebuilding was collected for Measure I, the Long Beach Infrastructure Reinvestment Act. Measure I was put to a vote of the public on November 4, 2008, with a strong push by Foster. The act, which failed to receive the two-thirds majority vote needed to pass, would have required an annual \$120 parcel tax for all residential and business properties for 35 years.

Johnson said one of the main reasons he is on the city council is to address the theme of challenges to government today, which he said includes how to get long-term thinking from short-term political institutions.

"My frustration is that so many times I see policymakers making decisions based on what's good for this month, what's good for this year, instead of asking what I think the appropriate questions are, which are what's going to be good for the city or the state or the federal government for the next five, 10, 20 years," he said. "We need to start having some more long-term thinking." ■