

Neighbors invest in communities to pick up slack in budget deficits

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Eduardo Garcia (left) and Hector Tomayo put in irrigation pipes in the median of Peacock Dr. near Pt. San Pedro Rd. in the Peacock Gap neighborhood of San Rafael. This is a city-neighborhood partnership to reinvigorate the medians and addresses a long-standing need with a shared financial responsibility. (LJ photo/Frankie Frost)

It's been a long time since buds bloomed in the city-owned median strips in San Rafael's Peacock Gap neighborhood, but they will this spring now that neighbors, with the city's help, have invested in the scenery.

"This has been born out of a group of enthusiastic people in the neighborhood who want to see the medians put back into place," City Manager Ken Nordhoff said. "It's a new type of project for the city in terms of how the money is collected and shared, and I think it's the new

model. Budgets are not going to get better in San Rafael or other communities for these projects. There is going to have to be a partnership approach."

Across Marin, cities and towns that have suffered at the hands of a debt-ridden state government, a sour economy, depressed property values and sluggish sales tax revenue have found budget savings at the expense of a year long tradition of city-sponsored beautification.

And while some have looked the other way, other neighborhoods have decided the dilapidated medians must go, and have gone hat in hand to residents to raise money to spruce up the strips.

In Peacock Gap, neighbors agreed to pay \$200 up front for a total of about \$80,000, plus allowed their annual assessments to be raised to cover ongoing maintenance of the medians along Peacock, Riviera, San Marino and Biscayne drives.

In late March, crews from landscape contractors Cagwin and Dorward replanted the strips, regarded as gateways to the neighborhood. The city contributed staff time to help coordinate the contract.

"You've got a neighborhood motivated - they want the medians to look sharp," Mayor Al Boro said. "They're willing to put money into it. We're able to help them to a point where it's more efficient than if they did it on their own."

"The process has taken a lot longer than anyone ever anticipated. But I think we sort of broke new ground on this public-private deal," said Greg Faulkner, president of the Peacock Gap Homeowners Association.

"It's not been without a difference of opinion but, having said that, once we got over the hurdle of finally getting approved, the city's been great to work with."

Just down the road, the Point San Pedro Road Coalition, a group that represents neighborhoods in East San Rafael, also has been working to team up with the city and county to spruce up the medians on a four-mile stretch of Point San Pedro Road. The group is set to unveil options to residents at a meeting in May.



Sterling Harwell, of the Point San Pedro Road Coalition medians committee, visits the median on Point San Pedro Road. (IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel)

"I think the theme and the sentiment is best expressed in our little slogan on our Web site: 'Creating a garden gateway to our neighborhoods,'" said Sterling Harwell, a member of the coalition who is working on the median project.

"The idea is this is part of our community, and it reflects on our community and the quality of life we have," he said. "These medians are not up to the standard of our community."

Linking arms with residents to restore services that have fallen victim to the budget ax can be a double-edged sword, some officials say.



A sign and a highway cone sit at the median of Peacock Driver near Point San Pedro Road in the Peacock Gap neighborhood of San Rafael. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

Residents are already paying taxes, said Wayne Bush, interim city manager in Mill Valley, where several such partnerships exist, including one in which residents in the Sycamore Triangle area pay to maintain the city's street trees. The idea of paying more doesn't sit quite right, he said.

"We may have to get creative with levels of service the deeper these cuts get," he said. "It's unfortunate that these things have to happen. People already pay their taxes, so I think it would be a last resort. Maybe it's a necessary evil."

In Fairfax, function came before beauty when residents of Scenic Drive, sick of the poor condition of their street, ponied up to help pay to have the road resurfaced.

This is the future, thanks in part to a reduction in taxes due to Proposition 13, but it has some drawbacks, said Michael Rock, town manager.

"In general we are not going to go back to those good old days," he said. "There are a lot of public-private partnerships out there. They work, but I have to tell you it was much easier to run a government when you had all the taxes that went into a general pot. Now you have so many revenue sources to keep track of - it's kind of mind-boggling."

Others see nothing but benefit from such arrangements.

"Public-private partnerships have a long history with local government," said Peggy Curran, town manager in Tiburon, where the city has a new cooperative agreement with residents to water donated hanging flower baskets in the downtown.

"I think it's always been a healthy thing, and we'll probably see more of it," she said.

Enlisting residents is tricky, because there is high turnover and it's a drain on city staff to train and keep up with them, but overall, bringing the public in is a good thing. Michael Frank, city manager in Novato, said the city is working with neighbors to keep open Slade Park on the city's east side.

"Neighbors and the community work best when the neighborhood and people living there are invested and care about their surroundings and not just when it's someone else's responsibility to take care of it," he said. "It allows us to accomplish more because we won't have the resources to do the things we want to do."