Businesses to vote on paying more for ‘Community Benefit District’

By Amy Sylvestri

San Leandro Times

The City of San Leandro is considering asking downtown business owners to reach into their own pockets and fund a “community benefit district,” paying to maintain their area instead of depending on city funds.

A Community Benefit District (CBD) is an area in a city where stake-holders agree to tax themselves in order to get better services. In San Leandro, the CBD being discussed would encompass the downtown area.

Cynthia Battenberg, the city's business development director, said the CBD would compliment a number of ongoing projects in the city such as the Lit San Leandro data loop, the Village Marketplace shopping center, and the street-scape improvements to San Leandro Boulevard near the downtown BART station.

The city has spent $65,000 to hire consultancy group New City America to help test the waters about a CBD here and find out what people might be willing to fund.

In the coming months, business owners in the downtown area will be balloted by mail about creating the CBD. The amount they'll pay is weighed by the size of their parcel, explained Battenberg.

New City America President Marco Li Mandri said an initial polling of business owners indicated a lot of interest. Li Mandri is currently studying what services would be a priority to people in the San Leandro CBD and the cost would be determined by those services.

People might be willing to pay more for security guards, sidewalk maintenance, or a shuttle service, Li Mandri told the City Council at a meeting last month.

“In five or ten years, this is the way cities will operate,” said LiMandi. “I think you are at the beginning of a wave.”

Chamber of Commerce CEO David Johnson spoke at he City Council meeting and said the CBD is a great idea and that Chamber will “strongly support” its creation.

“It is really necessary post redevelopment,” Johnson said. Earlier this year, all redevelopment agencies in California were dissolved.

But not everyone was in favor of creating a CBD. Public speaker David Erlich said he thinks it is unfair that one area could essentially pay for better treatment by the city.

“It’s not democratic, it’s the guy with the most money in the bank running things,” Erlich said.