

THE MODESTO BEE

Big spending ahead: Stanislaus leaders OK money for ‘island’ projects, parks, libraries

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Stanislaus County is moving forward with \$50 million in long-awaited improvements for county pockets that don't have basic services.

Supervisors approved the spending Tuesday evening for seven neglected unincorporated neighborhoods, saying they hope it paves the way for efforts to bring “county islands” up to standards and get them annexed to cities.

The \$50 million is federal relief money through the American Rescue Plan Act.

At Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting, the often frugal county leadership said the county will spend down \$60 million in savings in the next three years to enhance parks and libraries, restore county properties and stabilize the county workforce.

The plan for spending general fund reserves was approved Tuesday night in the final county budget for 2022-23, including \$16.5 million in community service investments and a \$15 million “building community” fund for spending on infrastructure in board member districts.

Supervisor Buck Condit said the investments in parks and libraries should have a “huge impact” on quality of life. But not many details of the public investment plan were disclosed during the budget discussion.

The county has the money to spend after building up reserves during the economic recovery of the past decade, but officials said at Tuesday’s meeting that signs of trouble in the economy are reason for caution.

The board approved the largest amount of ARPA funding for improvements in the Bret Harte and Parklawn areas in south Modesto. The \$10 million for Bret Harte and \$6.87 million for Parklawn will pay for sidewalks, street lighting, curbs, gutters and storm drainage.

The county’s first two projects will target the small county pockets at Topeka and Santa Fe streets in Riverbank and the Starr and Kenwood Avenue neighborhood in Turlock. The two pockets combined are less than 50 acres.

Supervisor Channce Condit asked about the timing of the projects and said he didn’t want to wait long for work to begin at the 1,200-parcel Bret Harte area and at Parklawn, which has 330 parcels.

Public Works Director David Leamon said the smaller projects will take less time to complete. Leamon also noted it will take time for additional community outreach to get input on specific improvements needed for Bret Harte and Parklawn.

Leamon said the county island improvements need to get done around the same time, because of strict deadlines for using the funds through the American Rescue Plan Act.

He said all the projects will be designed in 2023 and should be under construction in early 2025. The county faces an ultimate deadline of Dec. 31, 2026, for spending the ARPA funds.

Robert McKelvy, a Parklawn resident, suggested the board devote the majority of ARPA funds to complete improvements in one area so a neighborhood like Parklawn could be annexed to Modesto.

The board approval of \$10 million for the Colorado-Rouse area of Modesto is an attempt to get that 154-acre neighborhood ready for annexation to the city. Colorado-Rouse is part of a sewer improvement project in west Modesto, but also needs sidewalks, curbs, gutters and drainage.

The county hopes to combine the \$10 million in ARPA funds for Colorado-Rouse with a potential \$8 million from the State Water Board and \$5 million in state funding from Modesto.

Supervisor Mani Grewal said he is willing to add \$3 million from his district’s “building community” fund to \$2.2 million in ARPA funds approved for the Herndon Road area of Ceres, at least to get started on \$26.6 million in identified improvements for the Herndon area.

“Not getting it done is not an option anymore,” Grewal said of the Colorado-Rouse and Herndon projects, both in his district.

Board Chairman Terry Withrow said that \$10.6 million in ARPA funds approved for the Riverdale Park Tract will make a world of difference for the residential area, which suffers from contaminated wells and other problems. An effort is under way to get Riverdale connected to city of Modesto water service through Self-Help Enterprises.