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Santa Clara poised to begin preliminary work on 49ers stadium

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Construction workers are poised to install fire hydrants, move high voltage poles and conduct environmental tests on Santa Clara's site for a future 49ers football stadium, despite criticism that the city's elected leaders are playing a shell game with redevelopment funds.

Acting Assistant City Manager Carol McCarthy said that of the $4 million the council approved last week to advance the 49ers company for work on the stadium site, she expects between $700,000 and $800,000 will be spent through December on basic improvements at the site. In a controversial move, the council scrambled last week to give the team the money before state lawmakers vote on Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to disband redevelopment agencies to help balance the state budget.

But 49ers fans shouldn't consider this a stadium groundbreaking. That still could be years off with plenty of questions looming about how the team and city will finance the $937 million project next to the Great America theme park.

There's a list of about 16 items city officials expect to be started with the initial funds, such as demolition, grading, geotechnical testing and relocation of a transformer. In June, Santa Clara voters approved to spend up to $114 million in public funds on the stadium project.

Last Monday, in a 5-2 vote, the council decided to give the first of that money -- about $4 million from the city's redevelopment agency -- to Forty Niners Stadium LLC, a private company the team formed.

While there are many supporters of the council's move, there are also dozens of residents who officially voiced their opinions against it. One resident, Ron Zea, wrote the council: "Your cunning plan to hide redevelopment money by giving it to the 49ers organization is an atrocious plan that can be likened to making a deal with the devil. It is not even clear or guaranteed that the team will make the move. The 4.5 million dollars will be locked up and not usable for years."

The city's report does note that because the deal is not set in stone and because the complex financing plan is still in the negotiating phase, it's possible that any money spent on the project now would not be "recoverable" if the stadium project falls through.

However, there is a clause in the agreement that states the money must only be used on this "make ready" work for the site, and if construction of the stadium hasn't started by the end of 2015, any unused funds would be returned to the city.

A city report says much of the infrastructure work will benefit the area whether the stadium is built or not.

The majority of the council felt by handing the team redevelopment money -- instead of leaving it with Santa Clara's new Stadium Authority, a public agency designed to build and operate the stadium -- they would be protecting it

from a future state takeover.

When asked what the governor thought of Santa Clara's move, spokesman Evan Westrup said in an email: "It's outrageous that city leaders are rushing to funnel millions of taxpayer dollars to a professional football team while hundreds of South Bay teachers are receiving pink slips. Given our fiscal crisis, we should all be asking whether now is an appropriate time to be earmarking scarce public funds to subsidize one of the most profitable sports leagues in the world."

At this point, it's unclear if Brown's hope to do away with redevelopment agencies will actually come to fruition as he is lacking the Republican support he needs in the Legislature to make that happen.

So, the plan in Santa Clara is to forge ahead. McCarthy said that the 49ers company is now required to submit a budget detailing how the $4 million will be spent "as promptly as possible," which likely would mean within the next 60 days.

After that, the public bidding process for the project begins. Rajeev Batra, Santa Clara's director of Public Works, will be responsible for oversight of the work.

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