

rent annual budget is about \$16 million. The town has received the settlement money, which is currently sitting in an investment account held by the state.

The settlement funds have also been earmarked by the current council.

“A big portion of it is to support operations through the rebuild,” Phillips said. “A portion of it is to pay for our local share of grant funding that we’re receiving. A portion of it is to pay off some existing debt.”

The council has discretion over the funds—and members could decide at any point to shift gears, he said, adding: “They could come out next board meeting and decide to designate it for something completely different.”

Current councilwoman Schuster, who was elected to a four-year term in 2016, told the CN&R that the town’s settlement money must be protected and leveraged for the benefit of the town as a whole.

“[It’s important to] recognize that that money is not there to be handed out to the community; it is there to continue to provide services that a town provides,” Schuster said. “That’s why the town exists—to provide services to the community. Police and fire and animal control and code enforcement.”

Schuster recently spoke with the CN&R at her property in south Paradise, and she said the number of candidates in the Town Council race tells her there’s frustration among survivors with the rebuild. She said people feel out of control as they navigate their recovery and now, on top of that, a global pandemic. It’s a frustration that Schuster said she shares.

“I think that everyone feels that things aren’t moving fast enough,” said Schuster, who is rebuilding after her home burned in the Camp Fire. “And the biggest one—I think the biggest thing since day one, since Nov. 8, 2018—was that people aren’t getting answers to their questions.

“I wish I could give them all of the answers that they want, and I wish I could tell them what they want to hear. But that’s not reality. We don’t have all the answers.”

Schuster said she decided to run again because she didn’t see other candidates who share her values. Schuster described herself as open to hearing new ideas and taking into account the feelings of others.

“I care deeply for people,” she said. “I care deeply for the Earth. I care deeply for animals. ... I’m the only vegan on the council.”

Schuster also said she believes an experienced council is needed to navigate the town’s recovery, though she expressed her disappointment with Zuccolillo’s decision to run for re-election as he faces criminal charges in Butte County Superior Court.

“I am disappointed that he didn’t resign,” Schuster said. “I don’t feel that our sheriff’s department, or the DA, would have arrested a public figure—a popular public figure—with-

#### Candidate statements:

For information on all candidates for Paradise Town Council, refer to the Butte County Voter Information Guide available on the clerk-recorder site: [clerk-recorder.buttecounty.net](http://clerk-recorder.buttecounty.net)

out real solid evidence.”

**The Town Council was rocked in** April with the announcement of criminal charges against then-Vice Mayor Zuccolillo. According to

the Butte County Sheriff’s Office, Zuccolillo was targeted in a “‘To Catch a Predator-style’ operation” by an unidentified person over an alleged “bad business deal.” This person, the Sheriff’s Office said, brought forward evidence that Zuccolillo had been sending sexually explicit text messages and photographs to a person he believed was a 16-year-old girl. Once Sheriff’s detectives took over the case, it’s alleged he sent additional sexually explicit texts and photos to an undercover officer posing as the previously established 16-year-old.

Zuccolillo has pleaded not guilty to sending harmful matter to a minor, communicating with a minor for the purpose of engaging in sexual conduct and arranging a meeting with a minor for the purpose of engaging in lewd and/or lascivious behavior. His case is ongoing.

The council stripped Zuccolillo of the title of vice mayor on May 12, but the councilman has chosen to not resign. On a recent afternoon at his office on Skyway, Zuccolillo told the CN&R the case will be litigated in court.

“People get accused of things all the time,” he said, “and I tell people, ‘Judge me on what I’ve done for the town. Judge me on the decisions that I’ve made.’”

Zuccolillo said he’s received mixed reactions from the community about his re-election campaign. Some people have expressed their distaste for the councilman. Others have reached out through Facebook to show their support.

“You’re innocent until proven guilty, and it seemed that council wanted to be judge, jury and executioner, which is very disappointing to me,” he said. “But I’m not really surprised. I’ve never been welcomed on council. It’s been clear as day from day one. But I didn’t run because I wanted to be friends with them. My job wasn’t like, ‘Hey, I want to be your friend, let me in your club.’”

Zuccolillo said he sees town residents struggling with their recovery, many temporarily living in RVs and hedging their decisions on their settlement awards with PG&E. Zuccolillo said outside of the issues he’s running on—including restoring Skyway to four lanes and creating an oversight committee to advise the council on the best use of the town’s settlement money—he also wants to be an accessible councilman with whom residents can relate.

“I think it’s important that people feel like we listen,” he said. “And I think the representation of why all these people are running probably reflects on the fact that people don’t think that we’re listening.” □

**ELECTION** CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

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