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The Future of Orinda's Commercial Downtown Looks Bright

By *Sophie Braccini*

"We all want more restaurants, shops and services in the downtown," says Orinda Mayor Victoria Smith, "as a small city with limited funds we can best encourage revitalization by providing zoning and planning requirements that incentivize property owners to redevelop their older buildings in order to attract more tenants." Working on that plan was the mission imparted to a Task Force that was formed fourteen months ago, bringing together residents and experts.

On October 28th the Orinda Chamber of Commerce hosted the first public presentation of the plan. "This demonstrates the close relationship between the Chamber and the town," said Chamber President Keith Miller, before adding that this process was vital to the local economy which has been stagnant for too long. Presenters were Bruce Burrows, Amy Worth and Thomas McCormick, each representing a subcommittee: commercial, process and residential.

The Commercial subcommittee worked on options to revitalize the downtown into a vibrant village with a mix of retail, residential and office uses. "We really need the development," said Richard Westin, a Planning Commissioner who participated on the task force, "fiscally we always need more money, our roads are a disaster."

"Revitalization has been on the table for fifteen years," added Orinda Council Member Tom McCormick, "besides the increase of property taxes and sales taxes that the project will generate, one of the reasons to make the downtown more of a village is the needs expressed by our population that's reaching retirement age." In Orinda, 50% of the residents are in that category; most of them want to stay in Orinda, but may be in their large homes. The consensus on the task force was that increasing the number of residential units downtown would both provide a solution for the aging population while increasing shopping.

Bruce Burrows presented pictures and simulations of what the new city center could look like.

"We are thinking of three to four story buildings with retail at the street level and offices or living units upstairs." The group studied examples like the vibrant University Avenue in Palo Alto and the 55' high Mercantile building in Lafayette. "We want to leave open doors to trigger the creativity of designers and architects," says McCormick, "there are ways to build such units in a very attractive way with larger and smaller units, including some affordable ones." The group does not want to change the character of the town: "There are two types of areas in Orinda," adds McCormick, "the hills are semi-rural and the downtown can become a village with interesting stores and street side caf•."

In order to achieve "green" development in the downtown the choice of the task force is to provide incentive rather than setting rules. "Through history we've seen that restrictive rules have produced a dead downtown," says McCormick, "because that doesn't work, we want to provide incentives." A very enthusiastic promoter of sustainable construction practices himself, McCormick sees flex cars and shuttles, bi-and-tricycles and solar energy, all provided by developers who will receive a benefit in return.

To start convincing the many property owners in the center of Orinda, the members of the task force are meeting with all of them and advocating some type of cooperation. "Their first response is that they don't want to make changes because the town makes it difficult and the rents are low," recognizes McCormick.

"One of my ideas to streamline the process is to replace the long public hearings by a document presenting the project that property owners could get their neighbors to sign. One of our big ideas in Orinda is to have neighbors come together and plan together."

But on its road to revitalization Orinda needs to meet some more challenges. Highway 24 and BART cut the city center in half. "It is dysfunctional," acknowledges Westin, "we have to live with it, possibly create some walkways with more interesting beautification." McCormick agrees that solving this problem would be very expensive "ideally we would build a pedestrian walkway from the theater to the village, with stores on both sides like the Ponte Vecchio."

Directly linked to this aspect of the topography is the difficult economic situation of Theater Square. "We had it working in 2000 when Intraware had a derogation to have its offices on the ground floor of the Square," recalls McCormick, "the foot traffic generated by the business helped all the retail around it." As part of the new plan, the rezoning of Theater Square would allow non-retail options on the ground floor in the back of the professional building.

Ultimately, it's the residents who will make the decision. Starting as early as next month, a series of workshops will be conducted to get resident's ideas and comments. "I want to encourage all residents to attend the upcoming public workshops and provide input about how our downtown will look, feel and operate in the years to come," urges Smith. "I hope the public will participate," adds McCormick, "one problem in Orinda is that people who live here work very hard; it's often the same vocal minority that shows up. We really need to get people from all walks of life."

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