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Orinda's Downtown Revitalization Plan What Does a "Village" Look Like in 2009?

By Andrea A. Firth

As Orinda's City Council and Planning Commission reviewed and discussed recommendations for the revitalization of Orinda's downtown into a vibrant, pedestrian-oriented village, the question of what a village looks like today, in 2009 and beyond, bubbled to the surface. "We need to consider how we want the City of Orinda to look and be for our children," stated Council Member Amy Worth. "We need a drawing so the community can see what the downtown would look like with the proposed changes," she added. How to create a vision for City's plan for a newly revitalized village seemed to be the next great challenge facing Orinda, whose Planning Process Review Task Force (PPRTF) has developed 28 recommendations to facilitate the infusion of housing, alternative modes of transportation, and a greater diversity of retail options into the downtown areas.

While some advised moving forward conservatively with plans to revitalize the downtown, others lauded the Council and PPRTF's efforts. "Don't just modernize the whole downtown," stated longtime Orinda resident Ann O'Connell Nye who also raised concerns about the affordability of the two to three floors of condominium space to be potentially placed above downtown retail locations if a recommendation for raising the building height from 35 feet to up to 55 feet in some areas was adopted.

Former Orinda Mayor Bill Judge complimented the Council and Task Force focus on downtown revitalization, but he expressed concern over the adjusted 55-foot height allowance. "You don't want to end up with a single 55-foot monolithic building on a single parcel," stated Judge. He added that a nicely designed and articulated building of 55 feet on a sufficiently large lot could be a beautiful addition in specific parts of Orinda's downtown landscape. [To provide some perspective and a frame of reference given the hilly topography of Orinda, the top of the Orinda Library is 46 feet high and the top of the Vintage House across the street is 55 feet high.]

One of the goals of the PPRTF is to provide housing in Orinda's downtown—a key factor to successful revitalization noted Worth. Vice Mayor Tom McCormick added that with 50% of Orinda's population now retired increased housing downtown is both essential and environmentally responsible.

"You need three floors of residential space above the retail space to make it cost effective for the builder," explained Orinda Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu. The goal of the PPRTF recommendations is to have the building articulated and stepping back with only some areas reaching the peak 55-foot height, according to Ursu.

Ursu explained that construct a of a 55-foot box-like building on a small property in the downtown area would be unlikely to meet the existing design standards and that opportunity for increased building height will encourage the aggregation of small parcels. "Once developers know there is some interest for development, they will work to aggregate properties," said Ursu.

Planning Commissioner and PPRTF Member Richard Westin agreed that aggregation is a key factor to the success of downtown revitalization. "The only way to truly change the look of Orinda is to create sufficient incentives and disincentives to encourage the aggregation that is needed," stated Westin. "We need to get the property owners together and talking," he added.

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