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Downtown Revitalization-Getting Closer

By Andrea A. Firth



At a measured pace, Orinda is moving toward a more hassle-free process for residential development and establishing guidelines to foster the revitalization of the downtown areas. The City Council and Planning Commission have completed their joint review of the 61 recommendations proposed in the draft report of the Planning Process Review Task Force (PPRTF). Following an almost two-year journey and over 140 meetings, the PPRTF will now move to incorporate changes and feedback culled from multiple public meetings to generate a final report for the City Council.

As the Council and Planning Commission reviewed the final recommendations related to downtown revitalization, they worked to provide sufficient flexibility to allow developers to bring creative planning to the City while not uprooting the successful businesses already in place. "I am one for keeping this as open and flexible as possible," stated Planning Commissioner Richard Westin. "We don't know what a developer is going to bring to us...Leave it open and see what we get. Then we can begin to shape it," he added.

For not the first, or probably the last, time the Council and Commission members wrestled with the definition of a village character and what a village should or would look like. (Even the definition of semi-rural, as Orinda is often described, was briefly debated.) As proposed by the PPRTF, Orinda's village character will have a mix of retail, office, and residential space. It will be pedestrian friendly with inviting storefronts, include common open space areas, and take advantage of the surrounding natural beauty. For the visual learners in the group, the question still seemed to be-"so what does that look like?"

55-foot Building Height. Longtime resident and former Mayor and Planning Commissioner Bill Judge asked the Council to ensure that the PPRTF recommendations not go so far as to eliminate "the village" from the village of Orinda. Although the recommendation for raising the building height to 55 feet in the downtown districts had been reviewed at a previous meeting, Judge reopened the height discussion and challenged the rationale for allowing downtown building height to rise another 20 feet even if designed with setbacks. (The current downtown building height maximum is 35 feet.) "It's appalling, it doesn't fit...55 feet is going to far," stated Judge who used Lafayette's Mercantile Exchange Building as an example of why 55 feet is too high. "The Mercantile Exchange Building on Mount Diablo Boulevard is only 42 1/2 feet high," noted Judge. "Think about 35 feet or 42 feet but not 55 feet," he added.

Parking. Ensuring the availability of adequate parking to meet the current and future retail parking needs was clearly supported by members of both the Council and Commission.

According Planning Department Director Emmanuel Ursu, the Task Force felt that a parking study was needed to determine how to best meet this need. "I've always been convinced that everything comes from parking and goes from there," stated Westin. "Parking is a critical issue and hurts our retail business," added Planning Commissioner Bob Jungbluth.

Council members were quick to point out that the City could not afford to fund this study, and PPRTF member Clark Wallace indicated that he believed a developer would likely be willing to bear this cost. Ursu also pointed out that appropriately

priced meters in the downtown retail district are one of the most effective ways to manage street parking. "Parking meters have proven to be a good solution to parking issues in many successful downtown communities," stated Ursu. Council member Tom McCormick encouraged the group to take a bigger, greener look at the parking problem and consider a greater use of shuttles to the surrounding residential communities and employing more innovative solutions such as flex cars and bikes.

PG&E Towers. The relocation of the four PG&E transmission towers that traverse diagonally through the Orinda Village retail district-a sensitive issue for residents within view-was also debated. Ursu identified three different options for the placement of the towers that would free up two acres of additional land for development. "Moving the towers leaves you with many great options for opening up [the Village Center] and allows the possibility of creating a really nice pedestrian mall," stated PPRTF member Wallace.

As the discussion progressed, Council members Smith and McCormick found themselves in direct opposition on the subject.

"I support the no cost to the City aspect of this recommendation," said Smith. While she supported the individual property owners addressing the issue of the moving the tower on their own properties, she strongly opposed moving the towers to track along Camino Pablo Road-a scenic gateway for the city as defined by the General Plan-or to a location that would impact the views of residents. "This is an issue of view shed...this is a serious problem for me," she stated.

"The only way to revitalize the downtown is to move the poles. Somebody's view will be affected," countered McCormick. "We need to look at the bigger picture. We need the sales tax dollars from a restructured downtown."

Wallace also recommended the towers, if moved, be converted to the more streamlined, less obtrusive mono-poles that are used in other parts of the downtown districts. McCormick stated that cost of moving the towers is estimated to be \$6 million.

Next Steps: A final PPRTF report will be ready for the Council to review and act on by September. Ursu plans to draft new planning ordinances to address the changes proposed in the process and residential sections of the report with the aim to have those recommendations implemented by the end of 2009. Implementing the planning changes related downtown revitalization will likely carry over into early 2011.

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