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## City Council and Planning Commission Review the Year's Work

*By Andrea A. Firth*

When Orinda's City Council, Planning Commission, and Planning Department met jointly on March 9th, the feeling among the five elected officials, the seven appointed city volunteers, and six staff members seated around the large rectangular table was very collegial. Although business was down-the Planning Commission acted on only 37 projects in 2009 as compared to 61 projects in 2008-business was getting done better and faster.

"Smooth sailing" was the term Vice Mayor Victoria Smith used to describe the work of the City's Planning Department over the past year. "We are doing things right and more quickly," stated Smith. According to Orinda's Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu, the median time between submitting an application for a building permit to receiving a decision shortened from over 100 days in 2008 to 83 days in 2009. Smith was also impressed that since November of 2008 only two projects had been appealed to the City Council.

Several Planning commissioners commented positively on the impact of the Conceptual Development Review that has been implemented by the Planning Department. Prior to formally submitting for a building permit, applicants are encouraged to submit conceptual designs for review. The concept designs are reviewed in-house, a Planning Department staff member visits the site, and feedback to facilitate the application process is typically provided to the applicant within a few days. Applicants are charged a \$115 fee, which is applied to the formal permit application fee if filed within 90 days. "The conceptual design review provides a giant payoff for both the City and applicant," stated Planning Commissioner Chris Kniel. "The City has to be very pleased with the wonderful work done by our Planning Department," added Planning Commissioner Carlos Baltodano. "The staff goes out and looks at the site. They show a lot of integrity in their work and are very professional. You don't hear horror stories about our staff."

Ursu also reported on the status of the Planning Process Review Task Force (PPRTF) Recommendations. The City Council has completed its review of the Process and Residential sections of the PPRTF report and changes to the code, to implement the recommendations, will be in effect in May of this year. The Planning Commission has started to review the PPRTF's recommendations regarding downtown land use and development and will continue its review at regular meetings over the next three months. The Planning Commission next meets on Tuesday, March 23rd at 7:00 p.m. in the Library Auditorium.

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