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## Planning Commission Considers Rezoning for Senior Affordable Housing Development

By Andrea A. Firth

Orinda's Planning Commission held a special meeting last week to discuss the rezoning of the former Library site at 2 Irwin Way—the proposed site for a low-income senior housing development. The site is currently zoned for public or semi-public buildings such as a library, hospital, clubs, or for a utility but not residences. Formerly owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District, the 1.45 acre, now city-owned land, has a deed restriction that requires the site be used for a religious, civic, community, or school purpose. Four of the five planning commissioners agreed with the concept of rezoning the parcel to accommodate the senior housing project, however all five requested additional background and study in order to formulate applicable building development standards including density, height limits, and parking—all topics which are receiving significant attention in the discussions of new guidelines for the redevelopment of other areas in downtown Orinda.

The potential development of the former library site dates back over ten years. At one time proposed but then abandoned as the location for the new City Hall, the old library site was identified as a good location for an affordable senior housing development due to the proximity to downtown retail, services, and public transit. In addition, like all cities in California, Orinda is mandated by the State to provide several levels of affordable residency options, and the proposed 70-unit senior facility would fulfill the city's current requirement for very-low income residents, according to Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu. Orinda's access to state transportation funding through Measure J is tied to the city meeting its fair share of the region's affordable housing needs, Ursu explained.

"Seems like we have put the cart way before the horse," stated Planning Commissioner Chris Kniel, who disagreed with rezoning the parcel. "The site to me doesn't look like the right kind of place for a senior housing development," he added, noting that the steep topography would be unsuitable for seniors and that the location was prime real estate for commercial or market rate development. Commissioner Carlos Baltodano also questioned why this downtown parcel was being evaluated separately from the proposed task force guidelines for downtown revitalization. Ursu explained that the rationale for rezoning and developing new standards for the land at this time was to have these in place before Eden Housing, the developers of the senior housing project, were too far along in the development process. Ursu added that due to the deed restriction, this parcel could not have mixed retail and residential use as proposed for new development in other areas of downtown.

"Put it in some other part of Orinda," said resident Richard Colman. While he did not object to affordable senior housing being in Orinda in concept, he strongly disagreed with the proposed site due to concerns regarding increased traffic, limited parking, and the impact of the building height.

"I strongly support the last several Councils' approach to actively pursue this site for senior housing," stated Planning Commission Chair Dean Orr adding, "How we measure height on this site will become important." Commissioner Carlos Baltodano concurred, "I think this is an excellent site for housing. It's a difficult site to develop, but the location next to services and the BART is ideal." Baltodano voiced some reservations regarding building height, stating that he would be more comfortable with the proposed project if building height were limited to 45 feet to be consistent with the adjacent Orinda Senior Village.

The rezoning and development standards for the site will be discussed in a workshop format at the Planning Commission's August 8th meeting.

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