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Planning Commission Wrestles with Downtown Height Recommendation...Again

By Andrea A. Firth

Existing Building Elevations	
Address/Business	Building Height (feet)
<i>Downtown—North</i>	
2 Camino Sobrante/ Safeway	20'
19 Orinda Way/Village Pizza block	16'
14 Orinda Way/Orinda Optometry	36' [2.5 stories]
23 Orinda Way/Village Cleaners block	30'
25 Orinda Way /Vintage House	51' north side 45' east side 44' west side
26 Orinda Way/Library	42'
<i>Downtown—South</i>	
140 Brookwood/Union Bank	35-40'
21 Moraga Way/Bank of the West	18' (front)
61-63 Moraga Way/Peets Coffee	24'4"
81 Moraga Way/Mechanics Bank	20'
80 Moraga Way/Wells Fargo	22'

For the third month in a row, the Orinda Planning Commission meeting had record attendance as over one hundred attendees packed the Library Auditorium on June 22nd.

The Planning Commission devoted the majority of its three and half hour meeting to the review of a task force's recommendation to allow building height to reach 55 feet in parts of the downtown districts. After two hours of public comment from more than 20 residents, the buzz in the Library Auditorium continued through the break time as several attendees climbed to the stage to speak directly with individual Planning Commissioners and many others engaged in side conversations in their seats.

Although the task force (known as the Planning Process Review Task Force, or PPRTF) held over 140 public meetings between the Fall of 2007 and the Summer of 2009 as it developed a report outlining over sixty recommendations to streamline the process for residential development and establish guidelines to foster revitalization of the downtown areas, a number of attendees reported that they had little or no previous knowledge of the task force's work or report. The potential for 55-foot tall buildings and a robo call reminder had gotten them out to a civic meeting on a Tuesday evening—a new experience for many. Some attendees questioned the City Council's wisdom in the appointment of two local developers as the subcommittee for the task force's downtown development segment of the report. Many voiced concerns regarding the potential negative impact of increased downtown building heights on sight lines, traffic, and existing businesses.

To illustrate the potential impact of the new building height proposal, Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu presented sketches of downtown extended to the nearest residential properties, photographs taken from nearby residences that look out on the downtown sections, and the elevations of several existing downtown buildings. These data seemed to do little to change the mindset of many attendees who feel 55 feet is just too high for the quaint downtown environs of their semi-rural village. Planning Commission Chair Dean Orr expressed some disappointment that story poles, which show the 55-foot height, to be placed on two downtown properties were not yet erected, adding that the visual impact of the poles was important to the process and worth waiting for. Discussion of the downtown building height recommendation will be continued at the July 27th Planning Commission meeting.

Building Height—what's the issue?

Currently, buildings downtown are allowed to be a maximum of 35-feet tall and have 2.5 stories. (See Existing Building Heights)

Example of 55-foot tall building under the proposed guidelines Source: Staff Report, 6.22.10 Planning Commission meeting

In three areas of downtown, the task force recommends increasing the maximum building height to 55 feet. The maximum height of the building at the street facade would be reduced to 27 feet and portions of the building could rise up to 55 feet in areas set back from the street. As proposed, building height would be measured to the center of the gable, so the roofline could exceed 55 feet. (See diagram)

What some residents had to say about building height and downtown revitalization:

"Bringing in downtown residential may be absolutely critical to the economic sustainability of our merchants...

I hope to stay in Orinda [when I'm ready to downsize from my house on the hill] to something a little less

maintenance intensive." M. Harris

"I'm absolutely against 55-foot tall buildings, regardless of the setback. I think it will destroy the visual character of Orinda...I seriously doubt that people moved to Orinda because they dreamed of tall buildings and traffic and congestion." Name unknown

"It's the hills that define this town." S. Cronin

"I believe only the landowners and developers will profit, the residents will pay...Encourage the downtown and village facelift by other means, but retain the current height limits...We love our low-rise, semirural village, otherwise we would live elsewhere." C. Porges

"What this reminds me of unfortunately is something a general famously said during the Viet Nam War, he said, 'We had to destroy the village in order to save it.' I beg you, don't destroy Orinda in the guise of revitalizing it." N. Waranoff

"If those buildings are built, our experience of those beautiful hills will be seriously impaired...The proposal, although it may have been well intended, may in fact be a disaster." W. Loughman

"Downtown Orinda has never been vital and never will be vital." C. Vaughan

"The people here are saying we don't want it. We don't want 45. We don't want 60. Stop the process...It needs to be voted on...Put a facelift on Orinda, don't jack it up 60 feet." C. Flum

The Planning Commission's response regarding building height:

Following the extensive public comment, the five Planning Commissioners in attendance shared their thoughts on the building height issue. Some of their comments are summarized here.

"If there is a demand for a greater height in development, how come we haven't seen a request for it?" asked Chairman Orr. He stated that he would not be comfortable with the height maximum being defined to the mid-point of the gable and feels that whatever height limit is established must be more specific. "There are many, many, many good recommendations in the [task force report] regardless of height," said Orr, "I'm still very much in favor of bringing residential to the downtown," but he added that he would like to look at lower height limit options and possibly three stories.

Commissioner Carlos Baltodano indicated that he would prefer to talk stories versus height limits and is uncomfortable with using the middle of the gable to define the building height. He believes that with the infusion of more housing in the downtown, traffic is going to one of the biggest challenges and suggested other parameters such as traffic flow could be used to define the optimal building density and subsequently appropriate building height.

The building height recommendation was the one "that gave me the most pause," stated Planning Commission Vice Chair Louise Adamson noting that there are few downtown buildings that reach the current height limit of 35 feet. Adamson stated that she does not support large monolithic structures in the downtown districts and feels height should be just one piece of the design mix considered before approval of a project.

"We haven't had a lot of redevelopment downtown at the 35 foot level quite frankly because it just doesn't pencil," stated Commissioner Todd Berryhill adding that if the goal is to infuse residential use in these downtown areas, 55 feet and four stories was proposed because it is likely necessary for a project to be economically viable. Noting that Orinda's retail has never thrived as well as its flatter neighbors like Lafayette and Danville, Berryhill expressed some skepticism that the infusion of residential use in the downtown would guarantee greater retail success.

"I think what this process is doing is providing guidance for future development not guaranteeing that it be approved," stated Commissioner Steve Gathe, adding, "We have to have some kind of road of map for developers to conform to so that they can bring something to us with some confidence." In discussions with other residents, friends, and peers, Gathe said he has found many interested in seeing a change in the downtown areas although they do not support overly large structures, and he noted, "Until we get through this process, nothing is going change."

Save Orinda Calls for a Vote

"We are really concerned that the planned revitalization process has been spearheaded by developers," says Orinda resident Scott Zeller, M.D. Zeller says he and others fear that the plan is to tear down what is currently in downtown Orinda and put up 55-foot tall, five-story high-rise condominium complexes which they feel is inconsistent with the semi-rural feel of Orinda. "We have a little slice of heaven here in the midst of the bustling Bay Area," says Zeller, "We want to protect the gem that we have."

Zeller and several other Orinda residents have formed the group Save Orinda (www.saveorinda.com). The group is working toward putting an initiative on the ballot in the November election to provide residents the opportunity to vote on the building height issue. Save Orinda wants voters to decide on changes to the city's General Plan that effect significant changes to building height and use. Save Orinda is in the process of developing the initiative language and plans to solicit the requisite signatures by petition in order to get the on the November ballot.

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