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Planning Commission Steps Back on Downtown Building Height Decision

By Andrea A. Firth

Orinda's Planning Commission will take a step back from the process of reviewing the recommendations of a task force for the revitalization of downtown. The Planning Commission meeting scheduled for July 27th has been canceled, and a series of public workshops on the issue will be scheduled for early fall. The last three Planning Commission meetings, devoted to a review of recommendations for downtown development, were heavily attended by residents opposed to the proposal to raise the allowable building height in parts of the commercial district to up to 55 feet.

The announcement of the workshops came in response to recent community comments suggesting that the City provide more opportunity for public input on the task force's recommendations, according to City Manager Janet Keeter. "We want to re-align the review process and take a step back to be able to have an open dialogue with the community about the downtown vision and expectations," she explains.

"I want to see the entire process completely vetted and provide the opportunity for everyone to give input," says Mayor Tom McCormick who, along with Council Member Amy Worth, served as the City Council's representative on the task force. Over the past three years, McCormick participated in almost all of the 150-plus public meetings held during the development of the task force report and early review, but he acknowledges that there is still not full knowledge of the proposal among the city's residents. "It is better to slow the process and make sure everyone understands what is being proposed," says McCormick. "Not everyone will agree with the proposal once they understand the details, but at least everyone will have a greater knowledge, which is always good."

"The goal really is to come up with a plan to benefit Orinda going forward," says McCormick, who believes that on some level change is inevitable and feels the City should plan for it as best it can. "...if we do nothing to revitalize our downtown, then it will change on its own by deteriorating. Because buildings wear out and need improvements to meet current fire and safety codes, they will need upgrading. I think it would be better to plan the change rather than let it happen in a happenstance way."

Planning Commission Chairman Dean Orr, who has been on the receiving end of some of the more acerbic public comments made at recent Commission meetings, believes the workshop format will provide a better opportunity for a true dialogue which he hopes will move beyond the building height issue to some of the many other recommendations proposed by the task force. "The biggest thing that I would like to see come out of the workshops is more detail and additional support and back up for the recommendations," says Orr. "I hope there is more quality time to analyze these data and engage in a real dialogue with the community," he adds.

Members of the resident group Save Orinda, who oppose increased building height in the downtown areas beyond the current 35-foot limit, do not take full credit for the City's decision to change the review process but they are pleased with the number of concerned citizens who have spoken out against the height recommendation and believe their efforts have made an impact.

"Those of us who attended last year's workshops found them mostly to be an attempt by the task force to proselytize attendees to the glory of their plan, with little regard paid to those with opposing views," says Save Orinda member Scott Zeller. He cautiously supports the new round of workshops if the City actively listens to citizen input and arrives at a plan based on the wishes of the whole community, not just those of a select few. "I think it's a good way to proceed, again, as long as it's not a one-sided effort," adds Save Orinda member Kent Hagen, but he is skeptical, "I think it will make the City Council more aware that we want Orinda to remain the height it is. I believe, however, that the City Council has already decided what it wants to do."

Save Orinda plans to stay actively involved in the downtown planning process and to make downtown development part of the November election. Save Orinda supporters will put their cause behind their votes, says Zeller, "[We will be] actively campaigning for City Council candidates who share our desire to keep Orinda beautiful and semi-rural." They have not ruled out the possibility of placing an initiative on the fall ballot to provide residents the opportunity to vote on the building height issue, but the time needed to make this happen is running out, according to Hagen. While the specific dates are yet to be determined, the workshops will be designed to provide a more intimate and less formal venue for a community conversation, providing the opportunity to thoroughly discuss the context of the recommendations and also provide the possible use of a facilitator and/or an independent consultant, says Keeter. "The intended goal at the end of the process is to truly understand collectively what our members of the public want for our community and our Downtown's future."

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