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Senior Housing Development Gets Downsized

By Andrea A. Firth



View of the storypoles for the proposed senior housing development at the corner of Irwin Way and Orinda Way from across the street. Photo Exhibit B of the Staff report from the Orinda Planning Commission meeting of 8/31/10.

"It's overbearing, way too big for the lot, and not in keeping with the character of Orinda," he said, adding, "We can't ignore the new input from the public regarding building height." Commissioner Carlos Baltodano was also concerned about a building height of 50 feet or greater and preferred the maximum building height be capped at 45 feet to be consistent with the adjacent Senior Village.

Planning Commission Chair Dean Orr, who visited the site four times before the meeting, acknowledged that upon first view of the story poles the structure felt big. However, he noted that visual impact driving down Orinda Way going north was minimal. "You can't see it. It's incredibly well screened with substantial, mature screening," said Orr. The view that created the most concern for Orr, and several other Commissioners concurred, was looking at the story poles from the Citibank parking lot across Orinda Way. "I think this project as drawn, with the north and south wings going out to Orinda Way at four stories, is too big a change. Bringing it down a floor brings a massing that is more in line," said Orr, and he suggested that some of those units could be moved to the back of the property and be less visible from the street.

"We've heard what you are saying. We've all decided we've got to pull this back. It's just too tall," responded architect Sean Reynolds, a Project Manager with Dahlin Group Architecture Planning, which is working with Eden Housing to design the affordable senior housing facility.

After extensive deliberations, the Commission voted four to two (Kniel and Baltodano dissenting) to recommend a maximum building height standard for the site of 50 feet.

Zoning

Originally purchased by the Orinda Association, the parcel is zoned for public, semi-public use for buildings such as a library. With the old library vacant, the City began plans for an affordable senior facility on the site about 15 years ago and subsequently received \$2.5 million of in lieu fees as part of the Wilder development agreement to apply to the project. The Planning Commission voted to recommend that the parcel be rezoned residential medium density (RM), which is identical to the adjacent Senior Village, with an overlay district for senior housing.

What's next?

According to the City's Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu, the next step in the process will be the City Council's review of the Planning Commission's recommendations for the land-use amendments for the Irwin Way site; this is tentatively scheduled for the Council's

During the last week of August, story poles—a wooden structure of 2 by 4's connected with strings dotted with multi-colored ribbons—were erected on the parking lot adjacent to the tennis courts at 2 Irwin Way, to provide a visual for the height and mass of the senior affordable housing facility proposed for the site (see photo). Eden Housing, which was appointed by the City to develop the housing project, has proposed a four-story building with 70 one-bedroom units that exceeds 50 feet in height in some parts. The Planning Commission then met in a workshop format on August 31st to discuss development standards for and rezoning of the 1.45 acre city-owned site prior to Eden submitting plans for design review.

Height and Mass—what's too big?

"Personally, I think it's massive," said Jeff Mills, one of four residents who attended the meeting. After viewing the story poles and walking the property Mills found that the structure, with its hillside placement, towered over the street. "It's huge. It's blocking blue sky," he added.

Planning Commissioner Chris Kniel concurred, advocating that the current 35-foot building height restriction in the downtown district be applied. "In my opinion, [over 50] feet is not okay at all," said Kniel,

October 19th meeting. In the meantime, Eden Housing is in the process of revising the story poles and their conceptual building plans based on the Planning Commission's recommendations and preparing to submit the plans for design review approval.

Reach the reporter at: andrea@lamorindaweekly.com

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