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Published October 13th, 2010

## City Council Candidates Address Development

*By Andrea A. Firth*

The Lamorinda Weekly asked the candidates for Orinda City Council to provide their vision for development in downtown Orinda. In 300 words, we asked the candidates to address building height, residential space, the proposed senior affordable housing development, parking, and traffic.

Scott Zeller, M.D.

I fully support improving our downtown, but I am for smart revitalization rather than massive development. Though a task force was created to find ways to "revitalize" our downtown, its report instead recommended "redeveloping" it - calling for raising height limits in certain areas to 55' (or higher depending on roof pitch) - allowing for towering condominium complexes to be built.

This would turn our quaint and convenient downtown into a Transit Village. Once so changed, Orinda will never return to the semi-rural, neighborly, hometown feel that led so many of us to move here.

The development would likely evict many of our favorite local businesses, including some that provide major portions of our sales tax revenues. Parking could be very problematic in the new designs. And though downtown's piece of Moraga Way is an artery for many to eastbound 24, there has been no study as to what redevelopment would mean to that passage, or other traffic concerns.

The current Orinda General Plan is on target, calling for low building heights, unobstructed views of the hills, maintaining a village atmosphere, and supporting local businesses that Orindans need. I believe we should maintain this Plan. We can have new development, including housing, in the downtown area, but it must be consistent with this vision.

Any major change to the Orinda General Plan should be through a vote of our citizens. I have found our residents to be exceptionally intelligent; this is their hometown and I trust them to decide its future.

I believe we can improve on our downtown by embracing what makes us so wonderfully unique -- a charming, semi-rural small town nestled in a bustling metropolitan area. With a little foresight, effort and polish, people will be much more attracted to shop in our distinctive Orinda than yet another cookie-cutter suburb.

Amy Worth (Incumbent)

Orinda needs a tailor-made downtown that's vibrant and serves our community's needs. So while we can learn a lot by what has worked and not worked elsewhere, what we ultimately do with our downtown will have to reflect our unique history and our semi-rural character. Most importantly, what we do downtown must be driven by a process that gives everyone an opportunity to be heard and a process that results in a consensus. From my perspective, the choice between vitality and height is a false one. I believe we can give property owners a little more flexibility on height but only in exchange for design considerations that preserve our community's character.

I do support the addition of some senior housing in Orinda and in our downtown. Too often our seniors are essentially forced to leave town because our current housing stock does not provide enough of a variety of housing types. Some senior housing, particularly downtown and close to services like the library, the community center and shopping, will help Orindans stay in Orinda, and I think that is an important goal for our families and it should be one for our city.

Parking too can be enhanced and improved in our downtown and throughout Orinda but equally important is to find ways to make our downtown more pedestrian and bicycle friendly, which can help get people out of their cars and really enhance the charm of our downtown.

Sue Severson (Incumbent)

I support an inclusive community process and thoughtful two-way dialogue in establishing the vision for improvements to Orinda Village and Crossroads areas of our downtown. We have all seen the constant turnover of small businesses and the many deteriorating commercial buildings in Orinda. My vision includes significant improvements with added beautification to the downtown area, increased businesses that serve local needs and more housing options convenient to transportation. Establishing greater flexibility and unleashing creativity in making these improvements in our community by allowing some building height increase above 35 feet selectively up to 55 feet and diversity of downtown housing options can better meet community needs for increased local services providing homes for young families, working professionals and empty nesters. The proposed downtown senior housing project additionally provides for the specific need to provide more affordable housing options for our aging senior population. The same rules and process should apply to the senior housing project as part of the downtown area. The senior project, as well as all downtown projects, is subject to an additional planning review process that evaluates on aesthetic design, context and appropriateness to surrounding areas including height, landscaping, parking needs and traffic impacts. This is a reasonable approach to ensure downtown viability providing enhanced community services while maintaining the charm of Orinda.

Orinda voters have a clear choice this November ballot to select the candidate to entrust with many challenges facing our community including downtown improvements, infrastructure repairs, and balancing a strained budget.

Dean Orr

Orinda is a wonderful family community that I want to preserve and enhance. No one wants empty storefronts, and we all want successful businesses and restaurants in our downtown to provide amenities for Orinda residents. That is why I asked the City to schedule public workshops, so that citizens can create a community vision for our downtown,

and I am very pleased that the first workshop is scheduled for October 18th.

We must balance the need for a thriving area to meet the needs of our residents, with the historic desire of Orindans to enjoy a natural environment where hills and trees are the predominant features. I will protect our natural assets while encouraging new opportunities for businesses and restaurants to serve our residents.

I want to hear the public discussion about new housing. We have already planned for this with the development of the former school district site at Pine Grove, and it makes perfect sense; housing in that location will be close to BART, encourage increased pedestrian activity and local shopping and reduce car trips for residents. Additional housing will provide additional property tax, which is needed revenue to the city. I believe that the community will be proud of the senior housing project downtown and it will provide needed housing for seniors who wish to stay in Orinda.

Of course, we must plan for traffic patterns that take into consideration our narrow roads in need of repair, and we must provide additional parking downtown. I will continue to seek funds for traffic safety improvements and road repair. With my professional background and my experience as Planning Commission Chair, I bring skills and enthusiasm to the council as the community envisions a downtown that accentuates the natural environment and the services and restaurants that Orindans want.

Thomas McCormick (Incumbent)

Revitalizing downtown Orinda has been a city issue for 15 years. Prior City Councils created a task force to find a consultant to provide a revitalization plan; the task force recommended hiring the consultant that provided a downtown revitalization plan to Livermore. Money to pay the consultant was not available; therefore, the current Council created the PPRTF citizen task force. [PPRTF = Planning Process Review Task Force]

During more than 150 public hearings, the PPRTF heard many residents request downtown residential units, more parking, a shuttle bus, pedestrian walkways that unites downtown and gardens. The PPRTF took all suggestions seriously and presented a report. I support the public hearings now being held.

I believe the PPRTF recommendations provide the framework for a plan to create a unified pedestrian friendly downtown with a town center - all within our semi-rural nature. I support increasing the building height limit on specific down-slope lots to allow four floors, so long as there are appropriate building step-backs (not boxes), residential units above, more parking, a shuttle bus, and a pedestrian promenade. Studies show there is less traffic when residential units are above retail.

We currently do not have a plan for downtown; instead, we have an eclectic area with 1950's strip centers that do not accommodate resident's needs, parking or pedestrian walkways for people to enjoy our beautiful city. Creating a downtown plan will result in a unified village center where people can stroll to visit shops, restaurants and others. An updated downtown will also generate much needed sales tax revenue to fix Orinda's failing roads.

A prior Council accepted money that obligated the city to build senior affordable housing at the old library site. The project needs to be reasonable in size and pushed back from the road, not like what has been proposed.

A City Council Candidate Forum co-sponsored by the Orinda Association and the League of Women Voters of Diablo Valley will be held on October 13th. The Lamorinda Weekly will be on hand to cover the candidate forum and hear what the five candidates vying for three Council seats have to say. If you are unable to attend the forum, check out our website

([www.lamorindaweekly.com](http://www.lamorindaweekly.com)) the next day to read all about it.

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