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Orinda Seeks a Vision

By Andrea A. Firth

Orinda Visioning-what the City has labeled the next step in the downtown revitalization planning process-sounds like a good way to start talking about the future of Orinda's two downtown commercial districts, The Crossroads and Orinda Village. In fact, the City has been at work on developing guidelines to revitalize the downtown for over three years.

The current City Council set the wheels in motion with the creation of the Planning Process Review Task Force (PPRTF) in September of 2007. Hundreds of meetings and report pages later, as the task force's recommendations were working their way through public hearings held by the Planning Commission, the downtown segment of the report was sidelined by public outcry over a proposal to allow building height to increase to 55 feet in some areas. In response, the City has regrouped and planned two public workshops to provide community members the opportunity to discuss how they want to see their downtown change in the years to come.

The idea that Orinda's aging commercial districts could use a facelift is not new. The City's challenge has been to develop a rational framework to facilitate revitalization that coincides with a vision for downtown that has broad support in the community. At the crux of the current debate is increasing the building height, and residents' feedback on that aspect has been contentious. But there are points of agreement. Pedestrian-friendly, adequate parking, retail that meets Orindans' needs, and retaining the City's semi-rural, village charm are tenets of a vibrant downtown environment that seem universally acceptable. However, residents' views diverge on what this revitalized downtown should look like and how to get there.

With the first Orinda Visioning workshop set for next week, the Lamorinda Weekly met with the creators of the PPRTF downtown recommendations, Bruce Burrows and Clark Wallace, and two citizen groups invested in the downtown planning process, Save Orinda and OrindaVision. Here's what they had to say about their visions for the City.

PPRTF Downtown Subcommittee-Burrows and Wallace

"We were optimistic, we thought we could make the downtown better for the community, and this plan is the embodiment of that," says Clark Wallace as he points to his dog-eared, highlighted copy of the downtown recommendations that comprise 35 pages of the PPRTF report. Wallace, an Orinda resident for 47 years and a prominent developer in Lamorinda and the Bay Area, worked with another longtime resident, Bruce Burrows, to draft the recommendations which focus on downtown revitalization through a mix of retail, residential, cultural, and office uses.

"What impressed me about the task force was the incredible amount of experience among the members," says Burrows, who has worked in commercial real estate for almost 40 years and has specific expertise in retail leasing. Burrows, Wallace, and nine other residents, including Council Members Tom McCormick and Amy Worth, were appointed to the PPRTF by the City Council following a recruitment and interview process that was noticed and open to the public. Both men believe a revitalized business environment will result in increased sales and property tax revenues for the City.

Some residents have criticized the appointment of two local developers as inherently biased. Wallace believes these comments are directed primarily at him. As the developer of Theater Square, which sparked controversy when built, he acknowledges that he fell out of favor with some residents along the way; he is emphatic that he has no plans to develop anything in downtown Orinda again. Neither Wallace nor Burrows currently owns any property in downtown. Burrows and Wallace have distilled their vision for downtown to three primary objectives: infuse residential units into mixed use housing above retail and office space; encourage redevelopment of outdated and underutilized properties with an expansion in building height; and initiate a coordinated leasing and marketing strategy among property owners.

Both men feel that the addition of buildings with four floors to accommodate two floors of residential space above first floor retail and second floor offices is essential to incentivize retail revitalization and provides housing options for residents and built-in shoppers for retailers. "The current 35-foot building height limit is an impediment to development. It's a deal breaker," says Wallace. The last commercial development in Orinda's downtown was Theater Square back in 1988, according to Burrows. "We're not insensitive to residential interests," says Wallace, and both men stress that the recommendation for increased building height is confined to select areas.

Burrows spoke with many property and business owners throughout the course of drafting the downtown recommendations. Orinda's commercial land is spread across a disparate group of 30 property owners, some managed by family trusts and many who live outside of the City. So far, neither the property owners nor small business owners have actively joined the public discussion regarding the downtown recommendations.

Save Orinda

Save Orinda is a grass roots operation with a core group of about twenty residents who are unified on retaining Orinda's existing 35-foot downtown building height limit. Scott Zeller is a founding member of the group, which has endorsed his candidacy for City Council. "Endorsement of Scott is one of the ways we feel we can have an impact on the decision makers in these issues," says Owen Murphy, a de facto spokesperson for the group.

Revitalization is a misnomer according to Save Orinda's interpretation of the PPRTF report, which they feel is all about development. Collectively the group has been frustrated with the PPRTF process, and they frequently mention that any change in downtown building height should be placed on the ballot for voters to decide. They also feel that the proposal for mixed-use buildings has not been adequately evaluated to determine the impact on traffic, parking, and municipal services. Members' views vary on the viability and appropriateness of infusing residential space into downtown, but based on the retail leakage study recently conducted by the City, they do not believe residential units will bring a meaningful increase in sales tax revenue.

Preserving the City's semi-rural village character is a top priority for Save Orinda-one they feel is inconsistent with taller, higher density, transit-based, mixed-use redevelopment. "I care about the small businesses in Orinda, and I don't want to see them priced out," says Save Orinda member Kent Hagen. In lieu of what has been proposed, the group supports beautification in downtown with changes such as better streetscapes, cleaner signage, and storefront improvements. "We lean toward ad-hoc, market-driven facility modernization, to be negotiated directly between landlords and tenants, within existing building codes [including height]," explains Murphy.

Save Orinda believes a comprehensive survey of all of Orinda's citizens regarding what they would like to see happen in downtown is needed.

OrindaVision

About a year ago, urban planner Peter Hasselman and local architect Bill Simpson started to share their vision for what a vibrant downtown Orinda could look like. Hasselman's conceptual sketches present a pedestrian-friendly cityscape with attractive public plazas and mixed-use development. Capitalizing on the BART property - reworking the space to support retail and commercial uses and as a connecting link between Orinda's two downtown districts - is a key component of their design.

Hasselman and Simpson have been joined by four other longtime Orinda residents, Ian Baird, Michael Hanneken, Thomas Trowbridge, and Michael Woodcox, who each bring significant urban planning experience to the group, and together are known as OrindaVision. The six-man team has observed cities with village character across the Bay Area to identify the best elements to incorporate into a vision for Orinda, and they have presented their vision at informal gatherings with community members. "We have received very positive reactions to the presentation and supportive feedback, but most importantly the interface has stimulated discussion," says Trowbridge, adding, "Our hope would be that a community vision will coalesce, one that can be widely held and sufficiently clear."

OrindaVision supports more flexible zoning that allows residential and mixed-use buildings and believes there would be demand for housing units. "This is not about urban renewal," says Hasselman, who emphasizes that the incorporation of housing, like everything associated with these recommendations, requires good planning. "The concept of village character is not inconsistent with a moderate increase in building height in selected places," adds Trowbridge.

All of these groups plan to continue their participation in the downtown development process. The first workshop will be held on Monday, October 18th at 7:00 p.m. in the Fellowship Hall at the Orinda Community Church, 10 Irwin Way.

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