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Downtown Orinda-Double Vision?

By Andrea A. Firth

"Downtown Orinda is dreary...it's a nothing downtown," said one resident. "I like Orinda how it is," said another. Views were divergent among the 200 residents who packed Fellowship Hall at the Orinda Community Church to participate in the first of two workshops sponsored by the City and aimed at shaping a community vision for downtown.

"Tonight we're starting with a clean slate, a clear canvas," said City Manager Janet Keeter as she pointed to the large, blank piece of paper that lined the wall behind her.

Seated in rows of folding chairs was a veritable who's who of Orinda including three current City Council members and four Planning Commissioners along with several former elected officials and Commission appointees. The senior citizen set was well represented as were the resident interest groups Orinda Vision, Save Orinda, and Quiet Orinda. As facilitator Christopher Beynon of MIG in Berkeley prompted the audience to share their thoughts about the pluses and minuses of Orinda's downtown, his colleague Lou Hexter covered the white sheet with bulleted lists of what people had to say.

Assets and Challenges

Asked what they feel are the assets of downtown Orinda, many residents' comments focused on environment over structure highlighting the area's climate, semi-rural nature, and people. The small-town feel, easy access to other parts of the Bay area, minimal traffic, free parking, historic buildings, lack of strip malls and fast food chains, and safe setting were other things people like about their City. "The sidewalks roll up at night," said one resident adding, "Non-vibrancy at night in downtown Orinda is a good thing."

But what was good for some was not so good for others. Several residents said that the downtown provided little of interest for residents and that the commercial districts had very limited options for teens. Another resident opined the lack of communal space for both youth and adults and advocated for broader walkways, plazas, and more outdoor cafes.

"I want to spend locally. I want to park and walk in downtown," said one young mother adding that she and her peer group would like to see more good restaurants and possibly a utility store.

Eartha Newsong, a resident of the Orinda Senior Village who helps to transport Orinda seniors who can no longer drive, bemoaned the lack of residential housing in and near downtown. Newsong said that many seniors in Orinda want to move out of their homes in the hills to live within walking distance to downtown shopping and transportation. The location of Orinda's downtown presented its own set of challenges. Beynon noted that while the BART station and Highway 24 provide easy access, these attributes bifurcate the city into two downtown districts, which presents an identity challenge. Residents also noted that the small size of downtown, which is wedged on a narrow strip of land between hills on the east and west sides, also creates constraints.

Building Height

As the residents shared their likes and dislikes, they also repeatedly voiced opinions about the proposed 55-foot building height. Several preferred the low scale of the city, which currently has a 35-foot building height limit in downtown, and feared taller buildings would obscure the views of the hills and create a canyon feeling on downtown streets. One resident noted the potential for climate change due to taller buildings obstructing the ocean breezes that keep Orinda cool.

Others were open to a height increase, especially in the context of mixed-use buildings that would bring residential options to the City. "I would love to have my elderly mother move into downtown. I might even move there myself when I'm ready to leave my tidy little rancher," said Maya McBride adding that as proposed, the increase in building height must meet appropriate design standards.

Change-Necessary or Inevitable?

The fact that little has changed in the commercial landscape of downtown Orinda since the building of Theater Square twenty-five years ago evoked a mixed response among the attendees.

"Whether things should change is really a non-issue," said a resident who felt the 23-year old General Plan was outdated and needed to be updated to reflect how life is changing. Dick Marchick recalled that 35 years ago residents worried about the negative impact the building of Orinda Woods would have on the City. Marchick now lives in Orinda Woods, and the neighborhood has long been considered a desirable location and place to live. "We're selfish if we don't look forward to the future and think of our kids," added another resident.

The course of Theater Square represented a cautionary tale for some. "Theater Square was filled with restaurants and shops and now it is struggling with vacancies," said a resident who wondered aloud, "If we build it will they come?" Others questioned the need for and viability of Orinda's downtown. "No one moved here for the downtown. We're not going to use it," said a resident.

Next Step

"Clearly, this is not a cookie-cutter suburb. Orinda is unique," said Beynon, who explained that MIG's next step would be to synthesize and analyze all of the residents' input from the workshop. Residents can continue to submit comments regarding a vision for downtown via the City website (www.cityoforinda.org) through October 29th. The next visioning workshop will be held on Thursday, December 9th at 7:00 p.m. in Fellowship Hall of the Orinda Community Church, 10 Irwin Way.

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