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Published December 8th, 2010

Orinda Inches toward Affordable Senior Housing

By Andrea A. Firth

Plans for a senior affordable housing development in downtown Orinda have been in the works for 15 years, and the City Council recently moved a few steps closer to making this senior residence a reality.

The City has been working with Eden Housing, a non-profit affordable housing developer based in Hayward, to develop a senior affordable housing project on the city-owned property at 2 Irwin Way, the former library site adjacent to the Orinda Senior Village and the Community Park. At its November 30th meeting, the City Council voted unanimously to amend the City's General Plan to allow the property to be developed for residential, multifamily use. The site had been designated solely for public, semi-public use such as a park or a library.

Council member Sue Severson dissented when the rest of the Council next voted to adopt an ordinance for the creation of a senior overlay district at 2 Irwin Way and the Orinda Senior Village next door. Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu explained that the standards for the maximum height and number of stories for building on the old library site, which have not been changed from the original public use designation, are flexible. The Planning Commission can set the maximum allowable height at 35 feet, like the downtown commercial areas, at 25 feet, like the nearby residential areas, or at the height it feels is most appropriate.

Although the audience of about 50 who attended the meeting was uniformly in agreement with the concept of incorporating senior affordable housing into Orinda's landscape, not everyone agreed with the location or process and the issue of building height remained a sticking point.

"The location is amazing due to the access to transportation, retail, and other services," said Erik Andersen, a 28-year resident of Orinda. He recalled the public outcry against the building of the Orinda Senior Village back in the 70's and stated, "That project has worked out great, and [the concerns have been dispelled]. I encourage you to support this project."

In direct contrast, Planning Commissioner Chris Kniel stated that rezoning the property was a mistake for a variety of reasons. He felt the parcel should remain designated for public use to better serve all Orindans versus what he termed one special interest group. Kniel also felt moving forward with decisions on this project conflicted with the City's pledge to get more resident feedback about the downtown planning process and building height.

"Our ability to do this is very limited. There is only one [viable] parcel that the City controls," said Council Member Amy Worth regarding the City's requirement to provide affordable housing to comply with State Housing Element law. Worth also noted that the City risked losing County funds that had already been committed to the development of the affordable housing project. "It's only by putting together these packages of local, state, and federal funding that makes it so Eden can make this project happen," added Council Member Steve Glazer. Eden Housing Senior Housing Project Manager Woody Karp agreed that rezoning the parcel and getting guidance from the Council regarding the applicable design standards were important steps to moving forward.

Orinda is committed to putting senior affordable housing at the old library site secondary to an agreement made with the developers of the Wilder project. The City received \$2.5 million in June of 2006, which was the approximate value of the land at 2 Irwin Way at the time, from Gateway, LLC for the development of senior housing at this specific site. Ultimately, the City can provide the land to Eden for the project, and use the Wilder payment for other City expenses. The property appraised at \$2.3 million about six months ago, according to Ursu, and the City will be required to contribute any shortfall to the senior affordable housing project.

Storypoles erected on the old library site over the summer to show the footprint, height, and scale of the building drew criticism from some residents and caused some Planning Commissioners to hesitate. Subsequently, the Planning Commission rejected the original conceptual design and sent Eden back to the drawing board. In response, the building was pulled back off Orinda Way and Irwin Way and the number of units was reduced from 71 to 67, explained Karp. "There is a significant change in the presentation on the street as redesigned," he added.

The next step in the process will be for Eden to submit an application to the Planning Department. The Department's review of the application will take about three months at which point it will go before the Planning Commission for consideration. The Planning Commission's decision regarding the development will be final unless appealed to the City Council within 10 days.

Affordable Housing-it's Required

The State mandates all cities carry their fair share of housing at all income levels in order to meet the regional housing needs of the area. Orinda's current allotment of new low-income housing is 70 units, and the proposed senior affordable housing project has been part of the City's Housing Element plan since 2004.

In Contra Costa County, the housing mandates are tied to the City's receipt of Measure J funds, which help to pay for road repairs-something Orinda sorely needs. "The City relies on Measure J funds for approximately 1/3 of its roads budget, according to Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu. Orinda's Measure J funds budget will amount to \$327,000 in 2011.

State law also provides density bonuses and other incentives to developers of low-income housing. The Senior Housing overlay district approved by the City Council allows no more than 38 units per acre, however the application of the 35% state density bonus will enable Eden to build at a density of 50 units per acre on the 1.45 acre lot. Eden can also request up to three concessions, waivers or modifications of the building standards or parking, which they

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feel are necessary to make the project economically feasible. A. Firth

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