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Council Struggles with Denser Vision for Orinda

By Andrea A. Firth

Martin Engelmann, Deputy Executive Director of Planning for the Contra Costa Transportation Authority, recently presented the Orinda City Council with an initial plan for integrating land-use, housing, and transportation in the Bay Area in order to address global warming and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from cars and small trucks-the federally-mandated goal is a 15% per capita reduction by 2035.

Termed the Initial Vision Scenario, this is the first step in preparing a "sustainable community strategy" to manage the region's growth in a reasonable and eco-friendly way. According to this vision, by 2035, the Bay Area is projected to grow by 903,000 households and 1.2 million jobs. Almost 40% of this growth will be in Contra Costa County, with Lamorinda absorbing 3% of the load.

On a positive note, the Bay Area is already 2/3 of the way toward meeting the GHG emission reduction goal based on an adjusted forecast that reflects the impact of the economic decline, according to Engelmann. "We are a smaller Bay Area than we had planned to be, and that has helped us a lot as a region trying to meet this goal."

However, this preliminary proposal, which was created by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, falls short of further reducing the area's GHG emissions an additional 5% over the next 25 years. In fact the Initial Vision, which projects a growth of 663 new jobs in Orinda coupled with the addition of 1,305 housing units downtown, will yield higher GHG emissions in the Bay Area by 2040. "[The initial plan] was really kind of a dud," admitted Engelmann.

"These numbers are not realistic or achievable and completely out of balance for growth in Orinda based on the City's past," stated Vice Mayor Steve Glazer. The plan allocates a total of 1,920 households to Orinda by 2035, which compares to the addition of approximately 740 housing units since the City was incorporated 25 years ago said Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu, and he added that under the City's current General Plan, the City could accommodate a maximum of 580 new housing units in the downtown districts.

Council Member Amy Worth asked Engelmann about the City's obligations and if the Initial Vision is linked to the City's housing element. [The State requires all cities to carry their fair share of housing at all income levels in order to meet the region's housing needs; this mandate is tied to the City's receipt of road repair funding.]

"It's complicated," said Engelmann, "[ABAG is] saying don't worry about it, [the initial plan] is just a vision. But if it sticks, it will make it very difficult for cities to meet their housing element requirements."

The Initial Vision as outlined triples the size of the existing public transportation system, which Engelmann also finds problematic. "We can't afford to triple our transit system. We can't afford to run or maintain the system we have today."

Engelmann acknowledged that this initial vision of future growth required revision and a reality check. The next step in the process will be the development of five new scenarios that will project growth more closely tied to historic benchmarks and incorporate other strategies for reducing GHG emissions, such as higher bridge tolls, open road tolling, and revised parking policies. "We need to move back toward reality," said Engelmann.

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