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Letters to the Editor

Editor:

The City of Orinda has continued its workshops this fall designed to invite comment on what we would like to see in the future of our downtown. The planning staff is commended for its efforts to solicit our thoughts as the community formulates its vision.

The issue with respect to downtown is, unfortunately, that its commercial core is deteriorating before our eyes. Many of our commercial structures were built in the 1940s and 1950s to a relatively low design standard. Many are not well maintained. Many would not withstand the severe earthquake that is likely to occur in the next thirty years. Orinda residents are disappointed by what we see - an environment which becomes more unattractive with each passing year. We see merchants leaving and not being replaced. We shop and dine elsewhere.

We ask ourselves how to restore vitality. The answers, unfortunately, do not lie in promotional programs by the City, in creating associations of merchants or in volunteer beautification efforts. These efforts would be helpful, but they are insufficient.

We now face a choice in Orinda. The choice is not between growth and no-growth. Simply maintaining what we have in downtown is no longer an option. The decline is accelerating to the point that significant change is bound to occur over the next 10-20 years. The real choice we face is between unplanned growth, as we see in much of suburban America, and planned growth which is shaped by a community vision and guided by independent professional planning talent. Some of the nation's best and brightest urban planners are available nearby.

We can do a lot better than the status quo. We can fashion a plan for downtown Orinda that preserves its village character, but which also updates its environment to state of the art in the 21st century. Downtown should be a place where Orindans want to be.

Those of us who were not able to attend a City-sponsored workshop this fall can still respond to the City's survey on its website. We should let the Planning Department know we favor professional planning for the future of downtown.

Tom Trowbridge
Orinda

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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