

Published April 11th, 2012

## Orindans Make Their Voices Heard Regarding Downtown Development

Laurie Snyder

Twenty-eight area residents rose to express their opinions during the public comments portion of a March 27 meeting co-hosted by Orinda's City Council and Planning Commission. Their collective commentary stretched nearly 90 minutes, providing City staff and elected and appointed officials important, but often confusing input regarding what citizens want for the City's downtown.

City Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu transported residents back to August 2009 - the dawn of the current downtown debate - when a task force consisting of 11 residents, appointed by the City Council, recommended changing Orinda's land use policies. Planning Commission meetings ensued with the Council eventually deciding that broader public input on the vision of the future of downtown was necessary before the very specific recommendations of the Task Force could be considered.

Subsequently, frustrated by 100 poorly attended public meetings, the City hired the consulting firm of MIG to present community workshops. Fifteen hundred residents were alerted via Twitter, a Parks and Recreation program participant list and other methods, and a survey was prepared by the Planning Department and made available at community events and online.

Residents' comments from that survey are presented in the staff report on the City's web site. Combined with the audio of the March 27 meeting - also available online - one gets a picture of divergent citizen opinions, hopes,

Orinda's City Council and Planning Commission met in front of a nearly packed house at a joint session March 12. Twenty-eight residents provided feedback regarding downtown development before the elected and appointed officials turned their focus to zoning and updates regarding major development projects

Photo Andy Scheck

thoughtful analyses, heartfelt concerns and, at times, pie-in-the-sky dreams for a City with a budget of less than \$11 million.

"Add a few more fountains and gardens and artwork but no four story buildings," wrote one survey respondent. "If you want a town with four story buildings and residences on top of them and no parking and traffic jams, please move somewhere else."

Other comments included:

"We moved to Orinda because it is semi-rural, not because it has a bustling and 'vibrant' downtown," wrote another. "If we wanted that we would be in Berkeley, Walnut Creek or Pleasant Hill."

"I would like not to have to go to Lafayette or Walnut Creek ... to get a little nightlife! I'd love to feel it was a destination!"

"I LOVE ORINDA. I wish the downtown looked more like Santa Barbara or Carmel - Spanish style buildings to go with its origination..."

Still others suggested specific changes:

"I'd really like to see safe ways for the residents to be able to walk and bike to downtown."

"Make it like a downtown Aspen or even a downtown Truckee.... Consider closing down the streets to car traffic one night a week and have an Orinda stroll."

"Rather than developing new buildings encourage existing building owners (Phairs) to renovate and re-develop space for the new realities of live/work. Remove realtors from ground floor locations and replace ... with businesses that collect sales tax for our City."

During the meeting one new Orinda resident - a young mother - recounted being trapped with her small child in the elevator near McCaulou's. Saying she and her family moved to the community because her husband had an "idyllic" upbringing in Orinda, she now finds the city "uncared for and crumbling."

Former Orinda Books manager Maria Roden, a 12-year resident with a teen graduating from Miramonte in three years, described herself as puzzled by the city's empty buildings and shocked by its lack of supermarkets, calling the city depressed and shabby. "We need to plan for the future before it's too late."

Orinda native Jeff Hawkins observed that, while not sold on plans proposed by the pro-development advocacy group, Orinda Vision ([www.orindavision.org](http://www.orindavision.org)), "Downtown Orinda will change."

Owen Murphy of Save Orinda ([saveorinda.org](http://saveorinda.org)) asked and answered why citizens should care about downtown planning, saying proposed changes could irrevocably alter Orinda.

"Downtown Orinda plays a special role in giving Orinda its identity," said Bruce Burrows, who expressed frustration with disinterested property owners and merchants unwilling to upgrade facilities or operate on Sundays.

Herb Brown and Kent Hagan spoke against One Bay Area ([www.onebayarea.org](http://www.onebayarea.org)). "If people want to redevelop

and make things new" that would be fine, said Hagan; raising building height limits would not. Vince and Janet Maiorana pressed the Council to learn why Corte Madera and Palo Alto are fighting One Bay Area.

Richard Colman reminded attendees that the City's recent poll of residents showed that 98 percent of residents already rate Orinda as an excellent or good place to live.

Following a discussion on zoning and development project status updates, the Council concluded the meeting by commending participants for their engagement and for the evening's civil tone.

Reach the reporter at: [laurie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:laurie@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA