

Published April 25th, 2012

Of Fences and Neighbors

Laurie Snyder



Gate between Knickerbocker and Stein Way Photo
Laurie Snyder

The great gate debate rages on as residents of Orinda's Knickerbocker Lane and Stein Way recently laid concerns about a gate separating their two neighborhoods at the feet of Orinda City Council members.

Multiple presenters on April 10 stressed that the debate, which has grown decidedly discordant over the last few months, should not be thought of as neighborhood against neighborhood, but rather as a disagreement between those who favor keeping the gate in place with those wanting it removed - the pro-gaters versus the no-gaters.

"This is not two neighborhoods locked in combat," observed Steve Schnier, Chair of the Orinda Traffic Safety Advisory Committee (TSAC), as he also explained why TSAC members voted to ask the Council to permanently remove the gate.

Often on the receiving end of praise, TSAC has been criticized in the gate debate of late for overstepping its "traffic calming bounds."

"We are purely advisory," began Schnier. "We do not conduct hearings. We do not make decisions," he said as he recalled opportunities area residents were given over the

past several months to express support for or against the gate.

"We had been asked by City Council to consider this. We considered it," Schnier said. "In the end, there was one value that carried the day.... We did not even want to take a single step," he continued, toward supporting a gate that would contribute to making Orinda "a patchwork of gated enclaves."

Pro-gaters cited guarantees made by the developer, real estate agents, and even City personnel to keep the gate in place to reduce traffic and speeding. "We don't think it's fair to ignore promises made," said the group's lead presenter, who also stated that there is "no motivation to exclude Orindans," and observed that the gate in question was placed on the street because that street "was never intended to be a through road."

Another pro-gater advised Council members of the existence of a formal agreement between the City and Castlegate regarding the structure, and warned that opening the gate would cause problems. When the gate came down before, she said, traffic and speed increased - as did vandalism.

"It's not geography, but ideology," said Mike Low, who served as the no-gaters' chief spokesperson, and asked the Council to consider what action would serve the greatest amount of good.

No-gaters cited the wear-and-tear on the neighborhood's roads and environmental degradation from residents forced to drive 1.5 miles with the gate instead of 0.5 miles without - estimated by the group to be an increase in travel of 160 percent. Several felt the gate was un-neighborly and created an undesired enclave feel to the area.

But it was the specter of safety issues that truly took center stage - potential delays by Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) if firemen must leave trucks to unlock the gate en route to house fires, emergency personnel blocked from even getting to the gate by UPS trucks that sometimes block the structure while transferring packages between vehicles, residents unable to evacuate in the event of an emergency, and the most worrisome for many - the possibility that ambulances and paramedics would lose precious, life-saving seconds to administer oxygen or CPR while driving an alternate route or wrestling with the gate.

When one resident said that an additional 20 seconds to unlock the gate would not add much response time in light of the security benefits the gate conferred, another countered with the image of a child choking on a carrot, unable to breathe.

The structure does, in fact, present an obstacle according to MOFD Chief Randy Bradley. The gate has been vandalized - allegedly by Orinda residents - and then reinforced repeatedly over the years by City staff, becoming so sturdy that it is no longer "crashable" by fire trucks responding to an emergency, he explained.

Council members also learned from Bradley, however, that the paramedics most likely to assist Knickerbocker-Stein Way residents would in all reality not face gate-related delays. Primary crew members on ambulance calls for this area are actually dispatched from MOFD's downtown station and travel the non-gated route.

Bradley posed one possible solution - employing an automated gate that could be opened by a device similar to a garage door opener. Such an upgrade would be problematic, though, because the gate's reinforcements are too heavy and the cost for the fix would be high - \$25,000 to \$30,000.

When asked for his take, Orinda Police Chief Jeffrey Jennings noted that, for the gate to truly thwart crime, it would need to be guarded. Analyses have also shown a negligible impact on traffic. The greatest benefits of having the gate removed, he said, would likely come through residents and police having an easier time of leaving and

entering during any emergency.

Cautious Council members delayed "splitting the baby" in Solomon-like fashion and, instead, sent staff back to the stacks to dig for documents to help them craft a deft, down-the-road decision to satisfy all concerned.

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