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Light at end of Housing Element Tunnel?

By Laurie Snyder

"This is the seventh public meeting held on this issue," observed Emmanuel Ursu, Orinda planning director, as he began his latest presentation about the city's draft Housing Element before the Orinda City Council at a four-hour meeting Oct. 1. Ursu walked the City Council through draft four, incorporating edits made by council members at their Sept. 17 meeting, along with the latest changes requested by the advocacy group Orinda Watch (www.orindawatch.org/).

According to the 175-page staff report, the changes recommended to draft three by both sides were only included if they were required to obtain certification of Orinda's housing element by the California Department of Housing and Community Development, were factual, and were advocacy neutral.

After creation of that report by staff, the city needed to produce a subsequent update after a follow-up meeting Sept. 30. The changes are contained in a separate document, "Supplement to the Fourth Draft Housing Element (October 2013) - Agenda Item 1-2." Both were thoroughly reviewed by council, and are available on the city's website - along with the audio recording of council's meeting.

While a fair portion of the revisions made this time were substantive, others involved only minor phrasing edits, prompting visibly frustrated and weary council members to question whether or not all of the latest edits were really necessary in light of HCD's looming review deadline.

Likely next steps, said Ursu, include the circulation of a draft Negative Declaration by Oct. 22 "if the council determines that [such a declaration] is the appropriate level of environmental review." This would then be followed by a Planning Commission analysis of that declaration, along with reviews of the latest draft of the housing element and draft ordinances. If approved by the commission, the City Council would then adopt the declaration and element on Nov. 19 and the ordinances Dec. 17, before finally submitting Orinda's housing element to HCD Dec. 18. Failure to do so could cost the city critically needed state planning and transportation funding.

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[back](#)

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