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City Council Candidates Talk Downtown Development

By Laurie Snyder

When discussing the significant divide between supporters of Orinda Vision (orindavision.org), Orinda Watch (www.orindawatch.org) and Save Orinda (www.saveorinda.com) regarding what changes Orinda should make in the next decade, all six Orinda City Council candidates said most of the residents they have heard from favor a middle of the road approach to downtown development. Dean Orr

"When I speak to community groups, they don't want Orinda to change, they want Orinda to improve," said Orr. While most don't want Orinda to turn into another Walnut Creek, they do want to fix the Phairs' vacancy and find ways to attract new businesses. Equally important will be the willingness of business owners to invest in their properties. "Like owning a home, you have to fix your gutters."

To inspire this, Orr said, the city must improve its planning code. "What I know to be factually correct is that many downtown properties have been owned by the same families for years. Because they will eventually turn over, we must look at existing impediments for those interested in bringing properties up to modern standards." But unfortunately, that discussion has been sidetracked by debates over building height limits. "Would we rather have our buildings face the street? Should we move parking underground to encourage pedestrian traffic? Orinda can have a stronger more vibrant downtown, leading to a stronger more prosperous town."

Eve Phillips

"Orinda is a very special place, and I would love to see it maintain its village character. That's why so many of us moved here. It's an oasis from the broader, busier world. But almost everyone I've been talking to has been frustrated by the lack of change downtown," said Phillips. "Nothing has been built, but not doing anything hasn't been a good thing, either."

Asked how city leaders could improve the community's quality of life, she added, "There are a lot of redevelopment things we could do in smaller pieces that I think would really revitalize the downtown." One important thing, she said, would be finding a way to deal with Orinda's empty buildings. "We need fresh facilities downtown to bring more vibrancy in to the community. As long as you're keeping to the 35 foot height limit, setbacks and zoning density, there is room for improvement. I would be supportive of development of some of those older buildings as long it is consistent with our general plan."

Carlos Baltodano

"Everyone I talk to loves Orinda - residents, merchants. The downtown is a small, very precious area," said Baltodano. "It's a focal point for dining, shopping. It's our professional center. But businesses must be enhanced. Traffic and parking issues for patrons and workers, the empty parcels out there - I don't think the council has addressed these very well."

Agreeing that different people have very different ideas about what direction city leaders should take, Baltodano said, "We really need to clarify what our downtown will look like. It's nebulous right now. We need to re-engage the citizens again. My sense is that people don't want building heights increased any more than 35 feet, but projects that would maintain the semi-rural, village character would be okay. But whatever opportunity presents itself, it has to be well done, smart and sustainable - within a rubric of the General Plan."

Linda Delehunt

"Orinda is on the cusp of renewal. We have many old buildings that need to be refurbished and rebuilt. The Housing Element has to be blended, but it should be a neutral blending," observed Delehunt, who feels the new Monteverde Senior Apartment building is "offensive to many residents because it's 55 feet and doesn't fit in with the rural character."

Most Orindans, she believes, are in the middle when it comes to downtown development. "But one of the problems is that we haven't heard from most people. That's why we're seeing so much upset. I want to preserve the height limit at 35 feet, but I also think we need to do better at making sure

every voice is heard. We have a lot of small fragmented groups that don't feel like they have been invited to the table. I think we need a fresh look at ideas. We need to bring all of our citizens together to provide great renewal possibilities. What we create should be almost like a coalition government."

Bob Thompson

"People don't like developers, but developers have the ability to improve the properties we're all complaining about," said Thompson. "We need to step back and understand what we want so we can help city leaders and business owners better understand our wishes."

Of Contra Costa County's 19 cities, 14 have downtown specific plans, including Moraga and Lafayette. "But we don't have one. We know we care about quality, and want something that preserves the views and creates a vibrant community. In many cases, most of us feel anything over 35 feet is too high for most buildings, but in certain cases, it works. Think about San Francisco's painted ladies. They're higher than 35 feet and they're beautiful."

And because "investors look at potential properties as cash cows," Orinda must develop a flexible, long-term plan. "If we make it hard for them, they'll tell us to forget it, and our town will become old and uncomfortable. Even Disneyland changes. I think we have to recognize that."

Amy Worth

"People like our charm, the architectural diversity," said Worth. "Our theatre is a jewel - an anchor for the crossroads." Still, many Orindans have told her they want revitalization. "Like anything that gets older, we need to refresh our community."

But the nips and tucks aren't easy for a city with a small downtown divided by a freeway. "That's why council authorized sidewalk improvements and pursued funding for lighting where pedestrians walk to and from BART - to enhance access to both sides of the city."

A lot of thought also goes into how buildings look from the street and whether or not they maintain Orinda's semi-rural character, said Worth. "You can have a 35-foot building that's unattractive or a taller structure that works well because the terrain masks it. Orinda's General Plan provides a framework, but we need to continue to have a community process. And 'WE' means the whole community - all different ages of people talking about the different ways that they use the downtown and envisioning what they want to see in the future. The bottom line is making sure the aesthetics work for the community."

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