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Petition Highlights Burgeoning Demand to Improve Downtown Vitality

By Victor Ryerson

A petition to create a more vibrant downtown, signed by nearly 700 Orinda residents, was presented to the City Council Nov. 3 in what may be the beginning of a groundswell of demand to change Orinda's aging center soon. The petition, authored by Monica Fitzsimmons, who submitted it to the mayor and council during the public forum portion of the meeting, asks that the city "immediately commence development of a plan to restore Orinda's downtown area" with amenities "necessary to better serve residents and merchants and bolster the financial health" of the community.

Although city planners have been working on plans for downtown improvement for nearly as long as the city has been in existence, progress has been slow. Residents seem to have taken the lead lately in this effort, remarked City Manager Janet Keeter following the meeting. It seems that the community's changing demographics - at both ends of the spectrum - are fueling the demand. Creating an effective and workable downtown plan is expected to be the highest priority task for the city's incoming planning director, who will likely take office early in the coming year. According to speakers at the meeting, it cannot happen soon enough.

Presentation of the petition was followed by a variety of comments by a cross-section of the community. The unifying theme of the comments, regardless of the age or family status of the speaker, was that major change is needed soon in order to serve Orinda residents and compete with neighboring cities for their business. Some expressed the hope that they will not find it necessary to move to find what they need before change actually comes.

Ethan Elkind, the father of three small children who grew up in Orinda, whose parents also live here, encouraged the council to "go bold," referring to development of a downtown plan integrating major elements such as the creek that now runs hidden behind buildings and zero energy commercial buildings. "We're not afraid of a little excitement in our downtown," he added.

Speakers repeatedly stressed the need for vibrancy in plans for the change, but without disregarding the community's essential character. Orinda "isn't vibrant enough," said Michael Hoffmayer, one of the younger speakers. Fitzsimmons declared the need for a plan with "vitality" and "vibrant elements," while maintaining Orinda's semi-rural character. Karen Brockwell, who recently became an empty nester, would like to downsize and move to a condominium closer to downtown, but lamented that she wants to live in "a town that has a lot more going on." Another speaker decried Orinda's "vast parking lots and empty buildings," conjuring a very austere mental image of downtown. Several speakers expressed a desire for greater density in downtown housing, whether or not this would require changing the building height limit.

Speakers also alluded to the migration of shopping and dining, and the associated loss of tax revenue, to Lafayette and Walnut Creek. One speaker, who wants more than a single food market in Orinda, expressed her dismay at running into neighbors at Lafayette's Whole Foods Market. Others commented on the greater variety of restaurants and entertainment available in those other communities, and the planning process that brought them there.

Although the council could not lawfully comment on remarks made during the public forum portion of the meeting, Mayor Dean Orr assured the audience that the council had initiated the issue for discussion, and encouraged the speakers to stay tuned for further developments in the near future. Whether the council and incoming planning director will be able to fulfill a mandate for major change in the near future remains to be seen, but the pressure to do something to meet the challenge in a hurry is definitely on.

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