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Story Poles May Become a Thing of the Past

By Victor Ryerson

Image provided Dahlin Group, Pleasanton

Sitting at the dais in their meeting room, the Orinda Planning Commission reviewed the designs for six proposed homes in the Gateway Valley. Using images of the houses on a screen, commissioners could look at each building from the front, side, back, and above, and from any vantage point on any neighboring lot, comparing them to nearby homes. They could simulate a drive by, alter the color schemes, zoom in and out, and play with the details. Theoretically, they could even view the homes from outer space, if they so desired.

Is this a science fiction scene from "Back to the Future?" Hardly. This is essentially what the commissioners experienced at their regular meeting Nov. 10 when the applicant plugged in an iPad with the data to be viewed, which was projected onto big screens behind the dais so that members of the public could follow along. It was an ironic twist after the commission at its previous meeting discussed the policy for requiring erection of story poles to help visualize the dimensions and configuration of proposed buildings subject to its review.

Story poles are a time-honored simulation technique whereby the applicant erects a sketchy outline of the proportions of the proposed project on the building site, using lumber, or occasionally PVC irrigation pipe. It is an old technology, simple and low tech, and it works after a fashion if your brain can process what it sees. It is also outmoded, according to a report by Orinda's planning staff.

Currently, the city's design review application form requires story poles for all design review projects. However, the Wilder application checklist gives planning staff discretion to require the installation of story poles within that development. If the Wilder experience has taught the city any lesson, it is that better tools are available to do the job.

What planners have seen is that Computer Assisted Design software, long in use by architects and engineers, can be adapted to simulate and alter project designs for their use. Three-dimensional CAD images can be imported into modeling programs such as Google SketchUp to show what a proposed structure would look like from any desired location. If display screens are added to the city's meeting rooms, these models can be viewed and manipulated in real time, and can even provide video tours of proposed projects for planning commissioners and council members.

Mayank Patel, one of Orinda's two new young planners, is enthusiastic about the new technology, which he encountered in his previous job as an urban designer in the private sector. The technology is expensive, and may only be available to large developers at present. For that reason, it is still an applicant's option to use computer modeling in lieu of erecting story poles, he says. But it is clearly the way of the future.

Story poles are expensive, too, according to comments received by the commissioners, sometimes costing $5,000 or more. They are also prone to falling down, especially in windy locations such as Gateway Valley. If an applicant is required to install them at the beginning of the 10-day required notice period, as the commission is contemplating, they may be nothing but a heap of sticks by the time a commissioner makes a site visit. The wood used for story poles is generally scrapped. Modeling may make a great deal more sense if it can be done at reasonable cost.

The matter came to a head recently because some of Orinda's planning commissioners were

piqued by the absence of story poles at certain projects in Wilder. But they had not yet experienced the future. On Oct. 27 the commission directed staff to "bring back optional technologies that may be an appropriate replacement of story poles currently being used." Apparently, they did not have to wait long.

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