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Published March 23rd, 2016

A Neighborhood Grows in the Grove

By Cathy Tyson



Pulte Homes' Orinda Grove off Altarinda Road Photo Andy Scheck

bang for the buck - and they love the fact that there is no yard to take care of.

"Pretty much everybody moved here for the schools," she said. The community easily came together - first there was the "OG Moms" group, then some of the dads wanted in, so now it's called "OG neighbors." During warm weather, around 4 p.m., families get together at what she calls "kid alley," the central play area.

Residents include professionals from the technology field, finance, pharmacists, doctors and business owners, as well as some retired couples. Many came from Berkeley and Oakland, but some from Washington, D.C. and New York. More than half of the duplex units house local teachers. Reflecting on the newly-made neighborhood, Grasso says, "These people have made it so special."

The community has already held Christmas parties and a huge Halloween bash in 2015 that the entire neighborhood attended. Everyone dressed up, there were organized games and prizes, a cakewalk and a photo booth.

While residents are becoming fast friends, some relationships were already formed - two siblings each purchased homes, and former high school pals also each bought a house in Orinda Grove.

Jessica Sinnarajah grew up in the Bay Area, moved to Cleveland, and came back here to settle down with her husband, Jason, and their young family. She has been amazed how well all the residents get along and that, "We've learned to lean on each other." As co-director of the 800-plus member Lamorinda Moms, she personally feels the support from the group that hails from all areas of Lamorinda - parents who live in condos, apartments and homes - and sees the very same inclusiveness and sense of community in Orinda Grove.

Voiced concerns from project naysayers have apparently continued, but the schools have not seen the feared spike in student numbers and the City of Orinda has benefitted from a bump in property tax revenue, albeit not an overwhelming windfall.

With few opportunities to build near downtown, the quick sellout of Pulte Homes' Orinda Grove collection of expensive homes is a testament to the level of housing demand in the area.

It only took 20 months, from the first model home opening in October 2013, to June 2015, when the very last of the 73 units was sold, to create a brand new neighborhood with close proximity to downtown and a walkable distance to the BART station. That process included building streets, sidewalks and retaining walls, landscaping, installing water service, sewer, electrical and cable - along with two baseball fields and a tot lot.

Natasha Grasso, husband Ernesto and their young daughter just love Orinda Grove. They had previously lived in Burlingame and found their dream home here in Orinda, getting much more

One home recently sold in June 2015 for \$1.4 million, which would equate to \$14,000 per year in property taxes, but of that figure only 7 percent goes to the City of Orinda, or \$980 per year. The remaining 93 percent of every tax dollar goes to schools, Contra Costa County, special districts and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

Although there are occupants in all the homes, the school census is down this fall from last year. At the end of the 2014-15 school year, 2,564 students were enrolled in the Orinda Union School District. As of January 2016 the student population has actually 24 fewer students than last year, now 2,540, according to Teresa Sidrian, director of business services. She speculates this could be due to a number of factors, such as children living in the development might be too young for kindergarten or neighborhood kids attend private schools. Either way, "We are not seeing higher numbers," she said.

Unlike many of Orinda's ranch-style homes, the development by PulteGroup embraces vertical space and density - there are just slightly less than seven units per acre in the new neighborhood near Orinda Woods. What they lack in exterior space, the new homes make up for on the interior - with residences ranging from 1,533 square feet for duplex units to 2,672 for single-family homes in models with three, four or five bedrooms and two or three bathrooms. Open concept interior spaces feature a functional great room on the main level connecting the stylish kitchen with a massive island, dining and living rooms.

Although the unusual configuration of garages accessed from alleyways was supposed to make the development more pedestrian friendly, in practice, it means the row of homes facing Highway 24 also has their front doors facing the freeway. While only the four duplex units have a shared common wall, the space between homes is miniscule, and there are no backyards. Architects did make a real effort to employ an array of paint colors to help differentiate the homes, along with a variety of porches, decks, trellises, upper level setbacks and planter boxes to help the homes look less boxy.

The two new ball fields fronting the Pulte development were a component of the negotiations from the beginning; they replaced aging fields that had been part of the original site, and are still owned by the City for public use. OUSD negotiated with Pulte Homes to construct the new school district office building on the just under half-an-acre of the property that the district retained; it opened in 2014.

The project is more than a decade in the making. What was a run-down, vacant former school is now home sweet home to 73 friendly families.

[Editor's Note: This is the second in a series the Lamorinda Weekly has done on new communities in Orinda.]



Photos Andy Scheck



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