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Is Wilder Getting Wilder? Residents Push for More Restrictions After Crime Creeps Into Neighborhood

By Sora O'Doherty

Will the public amenities at Wilder attract an unwanted, criminal element to the valley? Some Wilder neighbors think so and lined up up to express their concerns to the Orinda City Council at a recent meeting.

The complaints ranged from an episode of drug-intoxicated strangers abandoning their car in the middle of the street and occupying a resident's driveway, to long response times by police, to concerns that traveling through the valley provides an opportunity to case homes for potential future burglaries.

Wilder resident Madeline Mallory stated that Wilder now has the highest rate of crime in Orinda. Some of the suggestions that were put forth included gating the parking area, locking restrooms, prohibiting the use of alcohol, and installing security cameras. All the speakers expressed a desire to be involved in the decision making processes, and the council members agreed that there would still be time for consultation.

Faster approval of new homes in the Wilder development, an Art & Garden Center at no cost to the city, and a trailhead respite area are among the goals of the seventh amendment to the Wilder Development Agreement, presented to the council. The amendment would also permit second units in Wilder, as are already allowed in the rest of Orinda.

While many aspects of the amended DA were praised, Wilder residents queued up to express concern about safety issues in the Gateway Valley and concerns that the Trailhead Respite Area would become a destination in itself and might attract activities that would be unwelcomed by residents. They expressed concern about the level of policing, and whether the East Bay Regional Park District has sufficient personnel to add the Trailhead Respite Area to the parks they maintain. The amended DA provides for an expedited design approval process for homes, which would be a two-step process of approval: first by the Wilder Design Review Committee and then by the Orinda Zoning Commissioner. Approval by the Planning Commission or city council will no longer be required, except when a variance is requested or upon appeal of a decision.

Mayor Victoria Smith hailed the plan as being more objective, given the high level of planning that went into the original Agreement.

Drummond Buckley, Orinda's planning director, noted that the reason the streamlined approval process could be fairly implemented is because so many design restrictions had been put in place during the earlier negotiations. With this extensive framework already in place, each application is simpler to rule on because it must already conform to so many standards. Hence the exception for requests for variances.

Wilder Handbook

There is now a Wilder Design Review Handbook, which draws together all the requirements applicable to Wilder homes in once place. Previously, applicants for Design Review approval were required to peruse the 2005 DA as amended, the Conditions of Approval for the Development Agreement and for the Final Development Plan, and the Landscape Master Plan to determine the requirements applicable to developing a new home in the Wilder Project. To streamline this process, Section I of the Handbook assembles these requirements in a single document. Smith called this handbook a great improvement, and added that it was sort of a "duh" moment-why hadn't it be done earlier?

The handbook garnered widespread praise. Previously, despite a builder's best intentions to conform to the requirements, it was all too easy to miss one and be sent back to the drawing board. In the past the approval process for Wilder has been acknowledged to be too cumbersome and time consuming, resulting in long delays and fewer homes being built than anticipated. Although initially the Planning Commission expressed some reservations about the changed approval procedure, they

did vote unanimously to recommend it to the city council.

Art & Garden Center

It was originally envisaged that the Art & Garden Center would be located at the far end of the Gateway Valley, drawing visitors into the valley and making the entire valley seem like an integral part of the city of Orinda. However, as development progressed, there appeared to be good reasons to move the center to the front of the development, near the playing fields. In agreeing to do so, Orinda saved something in the neighborhood of \$1.25 million, which will be picked up by the developer, OG Property Owner LLC.

The site which would have housed the Art & Garden Center will now be used for depositing soil removed during the grading of building sites, and for a respite area at the trailhead. The Trailhead Respite Area will include picnic tables, an ADA compliant restroom, a drinking fountain, and parking for 19 automobiles and 2 equestrian trailers. The respite area, which will probably be owned and maintained by the East Bay Regional Parks District, attracted the most attention and concern from Wilder residents.

At the conclusion of the hearing the council voted to introduce the ordinance adopting the seventh amendment to the development agreement. It will be up for a vote on adoption at the next regular meeting of the council on June 21.

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