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## Orinda creeps forward with streetscape plan

By Sora O'Doherty



Downtown Orinda: the Village, Crossroads, BART and surrounding neighborhoods within walking distance to BART that would benefit from expansion of the Streetscape Master Plan. Image provided

fee for parking requirement waivers, and consideration of amending the existing setback requirements of 10 feet for downtown commercial and 20 feet for downtown office sites. The most controversial proposal is the possible amendment of downtown density requirements. In the downtown commercial area current density is limited to 10 units per acre.

Two areas that were not considered by ULI and Mainstreet America, but which staff believes could be addressed are parking issues and planning for BART property, which could potentially be used for new commercial, office, residential, or hotel uses, as well as additional parking.

Commenters held very different opinions on almost all the issues, although the most popular idea for downtown Orinda continues to be the revitalization of San Pablo Creek, and a large part of the streetscape will probably be devoted to developing standards for bringing the creek into the downtown for pedestrians, bicyclists, and businesses. Nick Waranoff felt that the streetscape project is putting the cart before the horse and is premature. His main concern is density and urged that increased density not be considered. "Our zoning is our bulwark against SB-35," he suggested, and prevents state government from overriding local zoning decisions. (Senate Bill 35 amended the government code to require local entities to streamline the approval of certain housing projects.) "Don't let developers sneak into Orinda in this Trojan horse that is being proposed by your planning department," he warned, adding, Orinda is crowded enough.

Offering opposing points of view were Andrew Van Wye, Kirsten Larsen, Allie Draisin, and Bruce Burrows. Van Wye, who is on the board of East Bay for Everyone, an East Bay advocacy group which he said was born out of the housing shortage and the displacement and lack of opportunity it is causing for the most vulnerable, urged the city to increase its density requirements as soon as possible. It needs to be done before the state steps in and makes the city's efforts irrelevant, he said. In his opinion, it does not make sense to have a billion dollar piece of infrastructure like the BART station surrounded by low density single story commercial properties, which he believes is not the best use of the very valuable land and valuable infrastructure that we have.

Bruce Burrows, who was on the revitalization committee that came up with Orinda's design guidelines, urged the city to continue to consider use permit variances on a case by case basis. He pointed out that right now there are only four properties in downtown that could qualify for revised density requirements: Village Square, Country Club Plaza, 23 Orinda Way and the Breed-Parker block in the theater square district (the block containing CVS and Bev Mo.)

In his view, it's not feasible that Village Square would ever change and 23 Orinda Way is encumbered by PG&E power lines. Also the Rite Aide and the Post Office are basically untouchable now for the next 25 years, he said. This leaves Country Club Plaza and the Breed-Parker properties as the only ones with residential building potential.

He suggested focusing on these two properties with development potential and, on the subject of the height requirements, that the council be flexible. For example, he pointed out that while ULI recommended keeping the 35-foot limit for Orinda Way, they also suggested building down slope so that taller buildings, up to 50 feet, would still be 35 feet at the street level.

Downtown planning has always been a controversial subject in Orinda, but, despite objections from some members of the public, the city council on Feb. 6 generally approved a plan to issue a request for proposals for a new Orinda streetscape. Following on from the work undertaken by the Urban Land Institute and Mainstreet America, the city council applied for a grant to update the city's streetscape master plan. The streetscape project will be funded by a Contra Costa Transportation Authority grant, which is derived from two different CCTA programs (\$200,000-Livable Communities; and \$50,000-BART Access program) and the city's \$50,000 contribution in matching funds.

Staff sought direction from the council on the contents of the draft streetscape RFP and whether to pursue other downtown planning at the same time as the streetscape project. The council was positive about the RFP, but cautious about including other downtown planning. Next steps suggested by staff included consideration of amending current use permit requirements for downtown, allowing the sharing of parking lots, an in lieu

Kirsten Larsen and Allie Draison of the What's Up Downtown Orinda steering committee thanked planning staff for keeping downtown renewal a priority. They would particularly welcome an updated architectural guideline process, design guidelines for San Pablo Creek that will address development between the creek and adjacent developments, and improved pedestrian and bicycle solutions to connect both sides of town. WUDO believes that improved aesthetics can encourage businesses to come to Orinda. They also support additional parking on the Crossroads side, and envision a "park once" solution to allow for more residential/commercial development for the Village side.

Jennifer Harper spoke to the council of the frustration that Brookwood Road residents have been experiencing for the past four years. Harper suggested that Brookwood Road is unique in having a mix of high density housing, single family homes, businesses and now a bus stop that floods the street with parents and children because there are no sidewalks. Brookwood residents have been seeking walkability enhancements, traffic calming and parking restrictions for their road. This led to a discussion about whether to include in the scope of the streetscape master plan roads feeding into downtown. Planning Director Drummond Buckley said it might be possible to include residential roads feeding into downtown, but it would add greatly to the cost.

Council Member Darlene Gee said that it was essential to prioritize the project, and that topography and accuracy of maps have to come first. Council Member Dean Orr said that the streetscape plan should include the interface with BART on both sides, and Council Member Eve Phillips said that she thought there were a number of things that could really improve the quality of life for Orinda residents. Mayor Amy Worth promised that the city is working on a parking solution for Brookwood Road and said that design guidelines are very important, including the topics of massing, setbacks and height limits.

The council decided that staff should prepare the RFP and put it on a future consent calendar for a meeting in March. As for the issue of additional downtown planning, Phillips thought that the items are controversial and a source of conflict, while Orr thought the city should continue to research zoning laws and should earmark some staff time to look at some of the additional items. Worth felt that, although the conversations are really challenging, Orinda needs to have them.

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