

Published March 21st, 2018

Community uneasy about revamp of Orinda Community Park

By Sora O'Doherty



The Orinda sports wall is a popular spot for tennis practice. Photo Sora O'Doherty

would incorporate exercise equipment.

When public comment began, the amphitheater was the first matter of concern. John Cahill, a 37-year resident of Orinda, said that the message to ORSVP was "get out of Orinda." JoAnn Cahill said the ORSVP brings the community together, but they need bathrooms near the amphitheater, a ticket booth, and space for concessions.

Jill Gelster, ORSVP administrative director, told the council that the theater group has rented the amphitheater for 35 years and last year added pennants and painted the facility to match the Globe Theater. Contacted after the meeting, Gelster said that the ORSVP had heard nothing of the plans for the park until shortly before the meeting.

When the city decided to build the public restrooms in the park they added a concession stand/ticket booth to the construction. Gelster said that then Mayor Victoria Smith gave ORSVP a grant of \$1,000 which was used to improve the city's electrical box, enabling the use of theatrical lighting effects. If any of the proposed plans are implemented, Gelster said, it will prevent theatrical performances in the park. She also said that the group uses the Kinderym area for storage in winter, and in the summer for keeping props, furniture, and costumes. Without the space, ORSVP cannot function, she said. Gelster was also concerned about the ticket booth, the locations of the bathrooms, and concessions. ORSVP is due to begin auditions in April and will open its 35th season in June.

Former Mayor Laura Abrams said that the first responsibility of local government is to do no harm. She asked the council to not disenfranchise ORSVP, and also suggested that the bocce ball courts might be better in Orinda Oaks Park.

Comments then shifted to the sports wall, which is located adjacent to the tennis courts and used by people to practice hitting tennis balls. Drew Diefenbach works with the city of Orinda and coaches tennis in the park. He works with a lot of kids, he said, and thinks Orinda Community Park is a great, safe park. While he would like the bathrooms nearer the tennis courts, he thinks it would be a bad idea if it takes away from other park functions. Tennis is huge in Orinda, he said, and the wall is used by many people. Todd Nyman, a 26-year resident of Orinda, said that the sports wall is the most highly utilized area of the park all day long, all year long. Lots of friendships start at that wall, he added. Several commenters stressed that a single person who wished to play against the wall would never ask two people wanting to play a game to leave the court, if the wall were relocated inside the third court.

The park is one of the major features of the civic area in Orinda Village, and has been the focus of future planning for some time, including during the downtown development studies conducted last year by the Urban Land Institute and the National Main Street Center. The project began as a capital improvement project in 2013. In June of 2016 the city executed a contract with Callander Associates Landscape Architecture, Inc. for the purpose of design and development of an overall master plan. Callander conducted three public meetings with the Parks and Recreation Foundation and presented four different options. A draft Master Plan was approved by the Parks and Recreation Commission in December 2016. Construction costs were then approximately \$2.6 million.

Public resistance to a proposed master plan for Orinda Community Park at a recent council meeting focused on two elements: how the changes would affect the Orinda Starlight Village Players, and the relocation of the sports wall to facilitate the installation of three bocce ball courts. A number of public commenters argued that the changes to the park would be a death knell to the local theater group, currently in its 35th season. Other members of the public addressed the sports wall issue, noting that it is one of the most popular features in the park, and that placing it within a tennis court was not a viable alternative.

Parks and Rec Director Todd Trimble inherited the project when it was well underway, and presented the staff report at the March 6 Orinda City Council meeting. Trimble noted that there is currently only one women's restroom and one men's restroom in the park, that the park's play equipment is obsolete, and that the new plan

Although Orinda staff felt the additional dialogue was productive in building consensus during the process, the project funds were exhausted before presenting to the city council. The project also suffered from unintentional delay caused by the Miner Road sinkhole and a period of transition in city administration. On Dec. 19, the council approved a \$8,340 increase to the authorized contract amount for the Master Plan Services Agreement, raising the total amount from the original \$25,000 to \$33,340.

After hearing comments from the public and questions from the council, City Manager Steve Salomon stepped in and suggested that the discussion be discontinued and the matter returned to the staff for further work. Many of the parks features are well loved and need to be improved, he said, noting that no one attended the meeting to speak in favor of adding bocce ball courts. The budget includes \$100,000 for the park design, and is expected to be sufficient.

Mayor Amy Worth suggested that perhaps the bocce ball courts might work at Wilder, and Vice Mayor Inga Miller, noting that this was the first time the council had seen the plans for the park, asked about the enhanced entrance, and wondered if the amphitheater used by the OSVP could be suitable for another use. Trimble responded that the amphitheater could be used for events to raise money for the city. Council Member Dean Orr suggested that staff figure out what the next steps should be and not just hand the project back to Callander for further work as he felt that the project had clearly not been managed the way it should have been.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA