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Eisen-Letunic wins streetscape master plan contract

By Sora O'Doherty

With Council Member Eve Phillips casting the single vote against, the Orinda City Council on June 19 awarded a \$250,000 contract to Eisen-Letunic to create a Streetscape Master Plan for downtown Orinda. Phillips was skeptical about the ability of the group to be impartial in seeking and incorporating views of all types of Orinda residents. She cited some statements in the proposal that gave her concern, such as, "The city's recent planning efforts have revealed that some longtime Orinda residents, business owners and other stakeholders are resistant to change ..." while referring to other groups, such as What's Up Downtown Orinda and Orinda Vision, as "blossoming." Elsewhere the proposal says, "This plan seeks to pursue the perspectives of newer residents and others tuned into regional issues like housing affordability and availability and the advantages of a less auto-focused lifestyle."

Planning Director Drummond Buckley introduced the proposal at the June 12 council meeting and stated that Eisen-Letunic had scored far higher than the other six proposals the city had received in response to its request for proposals. After Phillips had expressed her concerns on June 12, the council asked Eisen-Letunic to return on June 19 to address the issues raised. The council heard from Victoria Eisen, principal of Eisen-Letunic, the company that specializes in transportation, environmental and urban planning, as well as team members John Gibbs, landscape architect and urban designer, and Ryan McClain, a civil engineer who will focus on a creek survey and green infrastructure.

Gibbs, of WRT, spoke of his work in Willets, a community that wanted downtown development but also to retain the city's industrial aspects, on Miller Avenue in Mill Valley, an affluence community in Marin County which involved telling the story of the rise of Mount Tamalpais, and in Yountville, where the town wanted to emphasize wine culture and authenticity. McClain, of Fehr & Peers, talked about his work in Palo Alto, on a citywide pedestrian project that was community focused. He referred to the concept of connectivity for all ages, 8 to 80, that Mayor Amy Worth had brought up after attending an event with Vice Mayor Inga Miller. Eisen explained to the council how the group plans to work with the community to come up with solutions that have broad-based support with a six-step plan that includes the publication of a briefing booklet for the community, workshops to acquire concept alternatives, a celebration during which they will receive feedback on their recommendations, implementation to refine the recommendations, and then the final master plan which will include strategies for the prioritization of elements of the plan with a focus on costs. The group will seek to identify goals that can successfully be grant funded.

Miller asked if the planned tours of the Crossroads Theatre Square area and the Village side will be available to participants on both sides of town, and was assured that they will. Council Member Darlene Gee asked about plans to communicate with people who cannot attend the meetings, and Eisen said that they planned to get the word out at community events, such as the Farmers' Market. In response to a question from Worth about taking all opinions into account, Eisen said that "there is no benefit to imposing any ideas we may have" on the community. "We'll be trying to come up with something everybody embraces," she added. In public comments, Bruce London said he didn't see why Orinda needed another plan, since, after all, he said, they already have the bicycle, trails and walkways master plan. Dan De Busschere said that the providers of grant funding are anti-automobile and, in Orinda, he said, that amounts to age discrimination. Chris Kniel said, "I think we've got our priorities all screwed up; we're missing the boat entirely." Richard Colman urged putting a moratorium on development, arguing that Orinda schools are already overcrowded. But Tom d'Amato of the Chamber of Commerce said that the chamber supports the proposal. "A development moratorium is the last thing we need," he declared, but urged the group to not rely on people coming to them, but to go out to public meetings, etc. Greg Haete also supported the proposal, saying that he wants to see a community with "thriving businesses where people can walk, bike, and connect with both sides of Orinda." He concurred with staff's recommendation to hire the group, saying that they "have the ability to bring together all stakeholders, not just the most vocal."

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