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Orinda considers options to fix ongoing parking problems

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Sora O'Doherty

Orinda is again trying to solve its parking problems, this time focusing on commuter parking lots, a long-term shuttle program, and residential permit programs. The city council unanimously approved a new \$12,500 contract with Harris & Associates to prepare a report on the proposed in-lieu parking fee and a \$40,000 contract with Park Engineering, Inc. to provide as-needed parking program management. At the same time, the city introduced a parking permit fee and increased parking violation fees for the first time since 2011. Orinda had undertaken a parking study, which concluded in 2016, but failed to lead to action. (See Lamorinda Weekly, June 29, 2016:

<http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue1009/Orindas-Downtown-Parking-Action-Plan-Stalls.html>.)

One of the most controversial matters currently under consideration is in lieu fees. Such fees are proposed by staff in circumstances where a development cannot meet its on-site parking requirements. Currently such requirements can be waived, and sometimes are, but the city lacks the ability to impose a fee in lieu. According to the staff report prepared by Senior Civil Engineer Jason Chen and submitted by Director of Public Works and Engineering Larry Theis, such fees could be put to good use funding alternatives that would themselves improve the parking situation, including acquiring or leasing land for parking lots, shuttle services, and enhanced bike and pedestrian facilities.

The city recently started a pilot program of issuing residential parking permits to residents of Brookwood Road, designed to combat all-day BART parking on that street. If successful, the program will be extended to other areas, such as Bates, Davis, Southwood, Northwood and Muth neighborhoods. The problem with such programs is that they might not solve the BART parking problem, just push it off into other areas. To address the BART parking issue, the city is looking into entering agreements with some local churches, whose parking lots are underused on weekdays, to allow BART parking for a fee. It is proposed that the fees be divided between the church and the city, and that such facilities be limited to Orinda residents only. Despite the problem of BART parking for Orinda, BART is seeking to increase ridership at its Orinda station, currently the second least used station in the system.

Another significant issue is parking for employees who work in downtown Orinda. An employee parking permit program is under consideration. Other parking measures being considered include creating additional parking spaces in downtown Orinda with low cost efforts, such as signing and striping. For example, more parking could be made available by creating angle parking at the south end of Orinda Way in the Village District.

Sophie Braccini, executive director of the Orinda Chamber of Commerce, said that the chamber was encouraged by the approach of staff and found it very pragmatic. Heidi Heidenreich Habestzer was against

the in-lieu fees. Rachelle Latimer also opposed the in-lieu fees and had great concerns about letting employees park in residential neighborhoods, and Owen Murphy was concerned about in-lieu fees as well.

"Why? Why now? Who is pushing for this?" he asked, adding that the primary beneficiary appears to be developers. On the other hand, Council Member Darlene Gee wondered why the proposed in-lieu fees are so low. She also wondered why there was a new parking study when the Streetscape Master Plan study was under way and how they would interact. Council Member Dean Orr wanted to make it clear that if Orinda opens church parking lots the program must be limited to Orinda residents only.

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[back](#)

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