

Letters to the editor

State control of local housing

I recently read where Lafayette Council member Cam Burks spoke out strongly against AB1487, which promotes State control of local housing. Mr. Burks said Lafayette had about 760 housing units built or pending against a Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) of 400 units. Thus, Lafayette was “doing our part.” The need to retain local control is understood. However, consulting with authorities, I learned that Mr. Burks’s statement was, at best, an oversimplification, and questionably positive. RHNAs are divided into four parts. For moderate affordable housing, Lafayette has about met its quota. For “at-market” housing, Lafayette has vastly exceeded its RHNA requirement, and developer-profitable at-market construction currently represents about 90% of recently-approved housing. Approval of required low- and very-low-income housing has been minimal. I have to ask: “Doing our part for whom?” Lafayette’s lopsided approval record stands to put its Housing Element in jeopardy, with unpleasant consequences.

In addition to the disturbingly excessive at-market housing approvals, an even more questionable recent trend is approval of the demolition of existing office and commercial space to make room for yet more at-market housing. The Council already has approved a “demolition and replacement” project at Brown Ave. and Mt. Diablo Blvd., and another at 1st Ave. and Mt. Diablo Blvd. is pending. Condo development is far more profitable than renting office space. However, in addition to loss of local jobs, residents in the future may have to leave town for many health and other services.

Does all this represent responsible planning and decision making? My consultants say Lafayette needs to declare a moratorium on approval of all new at-market and moderate-income housing. This hopefully will allow time for the City Council to re-evaluate the course of downtown housing construction over the past decade, allow time to draft regulations bringing the City into compliance with its RHNA, allow time to modify or revoke the City’s “Housing by Right” ruling, and allow time to establish laws preventing displacement of critical downtown services by housing development.

William M. Gilbert, Ph.D.
Lafayette

Orinda’s Streetscape Folly

The consultant’s draft Streetscape Master Plan (<https://city-of-orinda.app.box.com/v/ConnectOrindaDraft>) should be rejected, because it does not deliver what we were promised we would receive in return for \$300,000 of taxpayer funds plus substantial city staff time.

This Plan was funded by a \$250,000 CCTA grant of taxpayer money plus \$50,000 of Orinda matching funds. The City promised the CCTA that we would receive a design level conceptual plan, and after public hearings, “DESIGN DOCUMENTS” consistent with the conceptual plan and a FINAL “Downtown Orinda Streetscape Master Plan.” (<https://www.cityoforinda.org/DocumentCenter/View/2614/Contra-Costa-Transportation-Authority>) It now turns out that we will receive none of the above.

The Draft ConnectOrinda Master Plan bears little resemblance to what the City promised the CCTA we would receive, what the RFP (<https://city-of-orinda.app.box.com/s/dl-fu2h9o979sn2w2tdcroerndgymovjk>) required, and what the consultant promised to deliver. (<https://www.cityoforinda.org/DocumentCenter/View/2445/Eisen-Letunic->)

Instead of a “FINAL” plan, we will receive an INTERIM plan in which the consultant suggests that further consultants be hired to pursue future possible plans, each at a substantial additional cost.

Instead of “design documents,” we will receive “guidelines” that include “use landscaping” and “develop a maintenance program.” (see pp. 24-25 of the consultant’s contract for what was promised) These requirements could have been developed by a group of high school students doing a civics project. The plan does nothing to address parking, in contrast to the requirements of the RFP at pages 9 and 13, and in contrast to the promises of the consultant contract at p. 25. In fact, the only mention of “parking” is a vague suggestion to “improve bike/scooter parking.” (Item 4 of the Streetscape Design Guidelines.)

At a minimum, the Council should require that the consultant come back with something that is consistent with what the City promised the CCTA, and what the consultant

promised the City, we would receive.

Nick Waranoff
Orinda

A message from the Lafayette Chamber

Small businesses run on hard work and expectations. One of those expectations is knowing you will be open and ready for business each day. But that has changed for many businesses in our neighborhood. The PSPS (Power Shutdowns) have been a big challenge to our community. For families, it disrupts their routines.

Added pressure comes when you don’t have electricity and you can not predict if school will be open for the kids, or the gas station open to fill up. We rely on the services around us to get by each day. We take them for granted. We take electricity, and gas, and communications for granted. Now we face the “New Normal.” Our businesses have suffered and this is one of those times we need to thank our business community by supporting them.

Let’s go old school, skip the shopping on Amazon these next few weeks and shop downtown. Shopping Local matters! Remember, when downtown closes the city loses the sales tax revenue that goes directly into the city’s General Fund. All of us were inconvenienced with the shutdowns. Small businesses were devastated. Profit margins are fragile and loosing multiple days of commerce is critical to their survival. Restaurants and Grocery Stores took the biggest hit. They had to deal with all the perishables that were lost or at risk.

There will be discussion on who is responsible. Will there be compensation for the lost time and products? People are mad and this is understandable. But please, don’t take your anger out on the very people who are trying to help you. I had the opportunity to speak to a number of PG&E linemen. They have been yelled at, threatened, and been given the finger. These are not the people that have made questionable decisions about our utilities over the last 40 years. In my opinion, like our first responders, they are the heroes in this story. Show them you appreciate the work they are asked to do.

Lafayette has embraced the concept of BE KIND. Let’s model kindness. And one way we can do that is to support our local businesses. Put some money in the meters without

getting “pissed off.” We are all in this together. Our local merchants will be happy to see you.

Jay Lifson
Executive Director, Lafayette Chamber of Commerce

Halloween massacre and an issue of race

When I saw the news reports last Friday that three people were killed at a Halloween party in Orinda, not a mile from my own home, I was devastated, as I am certain all residents of our small town would be. Murders are rare in this small town and that is part of what we all love about this place, why most of us chose to move to Orinda in the first place. But when I saw the photos of the people who attended the party, the people who arrived the next morning to pick up their cars which had been left behind, I was devastated again because everyone in the photos was Black. There was not a White face to be seen. My heart sank because I worry that this will increase fear of Black people in this community.

While I have no idea who the shooter was or what his or her motives were (or if there was even a motive), I am

ashamed that this event has once again proven that Black people are so much more likely to be killed by gun violence than White people, even when they are in a place like Orinda, filled as it is with White people. It’s rooted in the deep, deep systemic racism that exists in our country and I find it so sad that, even when attending a party in an affluent and White place like Orinda, they are still the ones being killed in random acts of gun violence.

So, to my White neighbors, near and far, I say: Do not be afraid because this violence was so close to home for us. We are safe because of the color of our skin. Rather, let us use the closeness of this event as a call to action, to stand with our Black neighbors in Oakland, Antioch and Vallejo. To say, along with them, that gun violence against anyone is unacceptable.

And to the families of those who were killed or injured, I say, along with many of my dear neighbors, that I am so sorry for your loss. As the sign at the memorial in our town reads: “Your Lives Mattered.” Black Lives Matter.

Vanessa Smith
Orinda

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Nonprofit \$2M nearer to lighting up the Park Theater

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The trust evolved from a volunteer task force, called together last year by the city of Lafayette to explore ways to protect the theater for future generations.

Even though the theater has been shuttered since 2005, saving it remains one of the top community concerns. The trust has an extensive and growing mailing list for volunteers, another indication of interest in the community. TPTT is actively seeking new members for its board of directors, especially those with backgrounds in construction, finance, and fund development.

A classic example of Art Deco’s international offshoot Streamline Moderne, the 250-seat theater, built in 1941 was designed by cinema architect William B. David.

TPTT’s aim is to purchase the theater, refurbish it and then lease it to an experienced, for-profit operator, reopening as an accessi-

ble and inclusive, community-centered cinema, arts and culture hub. The targeted opening date is fall 2021, coinciding with the 80th anniversary of the Park Theater’s original opening in 1941.

The asking price for the property, including the fourplex residences behind the theater, is \$2.95 million. The trust estimates its fundraising goals from \$6 million to \$8 million.

TPTT Member Tracey Karsten Farrell says they anticipate fundraising through grants, activities, and private donations will start either late this year or early 2020. “Once we have met our ‘hard shell’ requirements, our for-profit operator will do the improvements required for its programming and lease the building from TPTT,” she says.

Farrell says this is all about community. “Think about it – when the Park first opened in 1941, people were finally putting the Great Depression behind them, but

there was growing concern and uncertainty about the war abroad. Having its own cinema was a real point of pride for our little burg, but also a special way to engage with each other and escape into all the fun entertainment Hollywood offered, without having to travel very far,” says Farrell. And she says it can do the same again.

“It’s something we can all embrace as a community and by protecting it in the Trust, also kind of pay forward,” says Farrell. “‘Movies at the Park Theater’ is something we would all love to do again – with each other, with our kids and grandkids – and what a wonderful community asset for all those folks to follow!”

Those interested in joining the board of directors should contact Kathy Bowles at bowlskathleen3@gmail.com

Further information on TPTT can be found at www.parktheatertrust.org

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