



ORINDA

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Memory care center: Wilder objects, but planning commission and others satisfied



Rendering provided

By Sora O'Doherty

Although the planning commission agreed with staff that some further study is required for the memory care facility proposed for 1 Wilder Road, the commissioners expressed their approval of the proposal, despite concerns expressed by a number of residents of Wilder at a hearing on Dec. 10. Other Wilder residents, as well as a number of Orinda residents, including former mayors and former members of the planning commission, expressed support for the planned memory care facility that would house 38 residents.

The commission agreed to continue the application to a future date in order to receive further information. When the matter comes back to the commission, the commissioners want to see a 3D representation that will allow them to judge the visibility of the building from Highway 24. The project would require an exception to the 27-foot maximum height requirement. At its tallest point, the building

would reach 30 feet. None of the planning commissioners saw this as a difficulty. The commissioners also seek a further study, to be financed by the applicant, of the impact of the facility on the potential evacuation in an emergency of all the residents of Wilder when it is fully built out and occupied, at which time it will contain 245 homes. The study should also factor in activity at the Art & Garden Center and the ball fields.

Wilder residents who oppose the facility expressed concern that it would impede the evacuation of all Wilder residents in the event of an emergency. The commission agreed that this should be studied, even if only to allay the fears of those residents expressing concern. In general, the commission wondered if the problem with evacuation, if any existed, was a preexisting condition that would not be impacted by the addition of 38 residents of the memory care facility.

Among the other complaints about the facility, Gary Rafferty said he was "dismayed" by the project, which he called a blight. The highly visible project, he said, was incongruent with Orinda's semirural character. Eric Egan said that the environmental impact review was biased, flawed and disingenuous. He said that the building would be similar to a brightly lit hotel. Kathy Finch was concerned that some would accuse Wilder residents of NIMBYism. She objects to the particular location, she said, but would not be opposed to another location within Wilder. This particular location would, she said, change the nature of Wilder, and added that safety is her primary concern. Attorney Shona Armstrong also spoke, representing the Wilder Homeowners Association. Seventy percent of Wilder residents, she said, consider the project not to be a benefit to Orinda residents.

Other Orinda residents spoke about the benefits they see for themselves and their families. Dick Burkholter

spoke about his wife, Betty, who suffers from dementia. "It would be wonderful," he said, to be able to visit her in three minutes from his home. Sue Severson, former mayor and president of the Orinda Community Foundation, noted that one-third of Orinda residents are over 65, and said that the facility is a "much needed amenity." Ted Urban, who served eight years on the planning commission, expressed surprise at the resistance by Wilder residents. He said that concern over evacuation is a red herring and shouldn't carry any weight at all. Another former mayor, Thomas McCormick, said that the city needs to look after everyone, not just Wilder residents. He approves of the project.

The Countryhouse Memory Care facility is being proposed by the applicant, 101 Upton Partners. The project would include a one- to two-story, 32,084-square-foot building with 38 assisted-living units, a parking area with 16 parking spaces and a vehicle turnaround adjacent to the front and delivery entrances, and landscaping. Residents would be those suffering from Alzheimer's disease and memory loss.

TJ Damato, the president of the Orinda Chamber of Commerce, spoke in support of the project. He said that the applicant, Richard Westin, is a longtime Orinda resident, and that the Westin family are suitable stewards. "There is no one more suited," he said, "to deliver this type of service. We are fortunate to have one of our own" proposing the project.

Westin addressed many of the concerns that were raised at the meeting, or in emails sent to the planning commission in advance of the meeting. He said that the applicant is willing to comply with Wilder night sky standards, and in fact has already incorporated them. He also suggested landscaping changes to address resident concerns. The lighting would not be a concern to the residents of the facility, he said, who would be long asleep by 10 p.m. In addition, he noted that residents will not be driving. "Memory care," he explained, "is a polite term for folks with dementia, including Alzheimer's disease." The facility will need to contain the residents, without them feeling contained. They will be taken on bus trips every day, and if ever a complete

evacuation of the facility were required, it would not be by ambulances but by bus. The facility will be completely occupied by memory care clients.

As far as parking goes, he explained that residents don't drive. Of the 16 parking spaces provided, a maximum of 10 will be used by staff. Visits are typically short, he said, lasting minutes rather than hours. In response to commissioner David Parnigani, he explained that there are perhaps four to five visits on any particular day. From his 35 years of experience in the field, he said, visitors are not frequent.

Chair Brandon Iverson said that she was impressed to see Wilder come together and speak with one voice. But she said that she considered that the project is appropriately located, and that the impact of 38 residents would be no more than the residents of 10 or fewer single-family homes. "There is no perfect in this," she said, adding that she did not believe that anything similar would ever get permitted in downtown Orinda. The Wilder Road site is zoned for this use, she said.

Further information is available at:

<https://www.cityoforinda.org/418/1-Wilder-Road--Countryhouse-Memory-Care>



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