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Orinda downtown precise plan: RFP fails, staff will do the job

By Sora O'Doherty

Last August the city council directed staff to issue a request for proposals to draft a downtown precise plan for Orinda. Staff reported back to the council on Jan. 7 that the RFP failed. They received only one proposal, despite reaching out to a number of companies seeking their participation. Staff posited three reasons for the failure to respond: the budget was insufficient; concern that the project would be controversial; and limited availability of consultants because there are numerous projects already underway in the area. Staff suggested two alternatives: either reissue an RFP with a substantially larger budget and a tightened scope, or manage the project in-house and issue either an RFP and/or a request for qualifications for specific tasks. The second alternative, according to the staff report, will still require an increased budget, but would cost less than the first alternative.

After discussion, the second alternative was adopted by the council. The project will be headed by full-time senior planner Mayank Patel for a period of 18 months. The city will also hire a temporary planner. In response to a question from Council Member Inga Miller about whether staff were concerned about pushback from the public, Planning Director Drummond Buckley said that on the contrary, "we are very excited about doing it in-house, with Mayank Patel in particular." Buckley added, in response to another question, that he was not concerned about finding a temporary employee. "The desire to get a foot in the door is very high," he said.

A specific plan is a tool defined by state law to allow a customized set of development standards to be legally adopted for a specific property or area. A precise plan is a similar type of document but more loosely defined that allows flexibility in defining the priorities for a specific area. Under the alternative adopted, the precise plan will be completed by the planning staff, with the help of contractors for specific tasks, which might include actually writing up the draft plan.

The advantages of keeping the project in-house, Buckley stated, include that it will be less costly and that the staff can start work right away, without the delay of another RFP. Council Member Dennis Fay said he was very comfortable with the approach suggested by staff, because it was what he did in his former employment. "You'll be able to start tomorrow?" he asked, and staff agreed that they could. Buckley said that he has had discussions with Lafayette staff, who utilized their planning commission when they did their downtown plan in-house. It was agreed that the Orinda planning commission should also be involved in the project, as well as the downtown subcommittee of the council.

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