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Published May 13th, 2020

## Orinda is moving forward on downtown development

By Sora O'Doherty

Downtown development subcommittee members Inga Miller and Nick Kosla were delighted by a large virtual turnout for the subcommittee meeting at the end of April. Having received a presentation on progress and heard public comments, the subcommittee gave Planning Director Drummond Buckley further direction on how to proceed. Four months ago the city, having failed to obtain a robust response to a request for proposals for development of a downtown specific plan, decided to use its own planning department to develop a downtown precise plan. The project is chiefly being worked on by Buckley and Senior Planner Mayank Patel, with additional work by Senior Planner Adam Foster and intern Darren Hughes.

Buckley began by reviewing the work done on downtown development during the past decade, including the work done by the National Main Street Center and Urban Land Institute in 2016 and 2017, and the downtown streetscape Connect Orinda work undertaken in 2018. In addition to working closely with the Friends of the Orinda Creeks on daylighting San Pablo Creek in downtown, the work has focused on near-term projects, limited to the public realm and predicated on existing conditions. This has included a concerted, coordinated effort to improve parking downtown by means of enhanced parking enforcement, residential parking permits in certain areas, a pilot employee parking scheme, and revisions to the parking in lieu fees ordinance, including changes in use.

Staff is currently working on an existing conditions report, and the draft report is about 90% complete. Buckley explained that this report will be an educational tool to help the public better understand the constraints on development, which include natural features, infrastructure and existing development standards. For example, he pointed out, current standards call for 10-foot setbacks and a maximum lot coverage of 50%, which leaves less than 20% available for development.

One topic that was discussed both by the public and the subcommittee members involves potentially moving or undergrounding the electrical lines that run through downtown. Unfortunately, undergrounding them would help only aesthetics, but would not enable more development because building over the lines would be prohibited. Additionally, moving the lines would be prohibitively expensive.

Hughes presented the models he has been developing in two and three dimensions, to aid in visualizing the massing and density of the existing build conditions within the project area. Both the subcommittee members and the public praised his work, and members of the public suggested that the models should be included with upcoming surveys to give residents more information.

Another informational tool that staff has been developing are property profiles. The profiles are the project of Adam Foster, who is using the Airtable Data Base with images. Each property profile shows the APN, parcel size, square feet, zoning existing and future developments standards and the applicability of existing and proposed regulations, which could later be changed to show regulations before and after any change. Patel said that the planning department is excited about this tool, which he called "a living and dynamic document that can be updated over time."

Buckley sought input from the meeting on next steps, which include an online survey, new stakeholder interviews on the precise plan, and three visioning workshops, culminating in a city council meeting. Orinda resident Nick Waranoff told the subcommittee members that the city should be "ashamed of themselves" for failing to express empathy with its business community who have, he said, served the city for decades. He also urged the planning department to conduct a "scientific study" before proceeding, stating that the last survey showed that citizens didn't want any changes. "I don't know what Mr. Buckley and his department are afraid of in a scientific study," he said. He criticized the city for undertaking "all this costly work . including the cost of staff to be working on something this complex and extravagant," and accused the city of "freely spending other people's money." Charles Porges said he was also concerned that this is going a little too fast during Covid. He asked the subcommittee, "Please don't spend money on downtown development until you know what your financial shortfall is going to be owing to Covid."

Tom Trowbridge and Aaran Schultz of Orinda Vision, who are glad that Orinda is going through a robust downtown planning effort, enthusiastically approved the work. Richard Weston, a member of the 2012 task force that met over a hundred times on downtown development was also positive. Michelle Jacobson warned that in the current environment things will take longer than anticipated, as many people are not yet fully comfortable with online communications. She reiterated her previous belief that Orinda needs a very able community engagement consultant, but praised "some creative and thoughtful work to be on board so quickly."

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