



ORINDA

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Orinda Council ponders tax increase, disaster-response coordinator position

By Sora O'Doherty

As Orinda tries to gauge the appetite of residents for increased sales taxes, one idea that is gaining ground is the addition of a permanent employee to coordinate the city's response in the event of a disaster. At the May 19 city council meeting, such a proposal was put forth by Orinda Police Chief David Cook, who talked about staffing for all-hazard planning and disaster evacuation planning.

Cook said he has been working closely with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and was very impressed. However, in light of emergency programs at the national and state level, local plans need to be continually reviewed, he said. In addition, there is a need for a person to coordinate emergency planning and community outreach.

Council Member Inga Miller talked about the tragedy

caused during the Oakland Hills fire by cars parked on small, windy roads, and wondered if part of the evacuation planning would include no parking signage in times of high fire danger. Cook agreed that such signage was definitely a possibility, and said that the position suggested would be a full-time job with specific duties including working with community groups to make sure they understand disaster plans, such as the need to keep the route to Sleepy Hollow School free for emergency vehicles in the event of a wild fire.

City Manager Steve Salomon told the council that staff has talked about this being a city employee. "While wild fire is the predominant threat," he said, the city also has a history of landslides, earthquakes, and other disasters. "There is," he said, "a variety of things the community could be better prepared for."

Director of Public Works and Assistant City Manager Larry Theis presented the staff report on a possible ballot measure in November to either extend the current half-cent sales tax, set to sunset at the end of 2022, or to extend it and raise it by up to another half-cent. Although the city had commissioned a poll of voter attitudes, it was con-

ducted prior to the impact of the novel coronavirus that struck the state, resulting in shelter-in-place orders being implemented in early March. The council has until around August to decide if they wish to have an Orinda sales tax ballot measure, and if so, what the specifics might be. One of the factors motivating the council is that should such a measure be placed on the November ballot, but fail to pass, the council would have another opportunity in 2022.

Theis also emphasized the need for additional funding to complete Orinda's extensive road renovation project. Although the residential roads have been largely completed, the city still has to deal with its arterials and collectors, as well as its storm drains. The subject of road improvements has continually been brought before the city council, and the work could easily absorb all of the increased revenue from an extension of the half-cent sales tax or even a proposed increase. Theis emphasized that the more money spent on the roads early, the lower the costs will be later. The issue of whether or not the city should contribute in some manner to the upkeep of private roads has been controversial. Although there were no speakers on the subject participating in

the meeting, there was a large number of written submissions, including a long discussion by private roads proponent Steve Cohn, who stated that he believes "the community has voiced a strong opinion in favor of publicly funding roads and storm drains built on private property." The council received emails supportive of the private roads from a further two dozen residents, the Bear Ridge HOA Board of Directors and a petition signed by 735 residents of Orinda.

Other written submissions were from residents, including those who live in Orinda's Firewise communities, emphasizing the need for much greater efforts to prevent future wild fire events from affecting Orinda.

The council authorized funding for more polls, more detailed than tracking polls. The matter will return to the council, possibly more than once prior to a decision on what tax measures, if any, should be placed on the November ballot.

A joint fire prevention committee between MOFD and Orinda and Moraga council members and others was also announced at the meeting (see story Page A10).

All the materials submitted to the city council are available on the city's website: <https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/v/citycouncilmeetings/file/667174071671>

State housing pressure drives Orinda to adopt objective standards

By Sora O'Doherty

In response to a great deal of public comment, the Orinda City Council on May 19 removed from its consent calendar the award of a contract to draft objective design standards for the Downtown Precise Plan, but passed the item unanimously nevertheless.

The contract was awarded to Opticos Design, Inc. The proposed cost for the work is \$90,000, with a contingency for change orders of 15%, resulting in a maximum expenditure not to exceed \$103,500.

The city council received over a dozen comments urging that the city not commit to spend that amount of money during a fiscal crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The staff report was presented to the council by Planning Director Drummond Buckley and Senior Planner Mayank Patel. They explained that there were two factors that made the expenditure advisable: first, a great deal of the cost is being funded by a source provided by Senate Bill 2 for streamlined housing approval. That \$70,000 cannot be used for any other purpose; if not used for this, the money would have to be returned and could not be used for any other city projects.

Second, the pandemic has made the housing crisis in California even more urgent, and the state legislature will continue to try to impose more housing on localities. Buckley pointed out that despite the changes in California's economic outlook, housing streamlining remains in the

Governor's revised budget. The only control that localities have in streamlined applications may be their adopted objective design standards, which will apply to new construction even where the city lacks any discretion over the application.

Objective standards include criteria such as housing density and building heights. Objective standards can also include requirements about "shaping the box," for example, breaking up rooflines, upper story setbacks, horizontal articulation, vertical orientation of windows, and roof mount requirements. If the city doesn't decide how to regulate mixed-use and residential buildings, the state will step in and decide, the staff said.

Council Member Inga Miller asked if interim objective standards could be put in place to protect the city. However, Buckley said that to do so would use additional resources when the city is already pushed to its limits. Trying for interim standards would be a big distraction, he added, noting it is not warranted and could cause a delay in staff's other responsibilities. Miller agreed that it would be inadvisable to try for interim standards.

Nick Waranoff in public comments compared Orinda to the Titanic heading for an iceberg. He argued that every city in the state is "going to be thrown into the SB 35 bucket" and that there isn't going to be time in the streamline standards process. "From Walnut Creek to Berkeley to Oakland," he said, "we've all seen the really ugly buildings that have been built under objective

standards." Council Member Dennis Fay concluded, "We need to move forward with this; if we don't, we'd have to give the money back." Mayor Darlene Gee agreed that there is no logic in handing money back to the state. She noted that while many commenters don't want to see housing in downtown Orinda, many state legislators "would love to see lots of housing in downtown Orinda, and they are not backing off." The mayor said that the city is on the right course of setting its own destiny. "By not doing so," she said, "we would be at extraordinary risk of the state coming in and saying what downtown Orinda should look like." Vice Mayor Amy Worth was impressed by the proposal that results in the highest level of public input into the standards.

The process is scheduled to take about nine months, and to involve a great deal of public input. Upon award of the contract, staff will hold a kickoff meeting with the consultant to refine the scope and schedule (as necessary), go over data needs, and discuss potential collaboration opportunities with other consultants the city has engaged for the downtown precise plan. At a minimum, Opticos will conduct a micro-analysis and visual inventory of existing site conditions design; draft new zones, permitting procedures, and regulating plan; and develop objective design standards for building types, frontages, thoroughfares, civic/public space, and parking.

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