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Letters to the editor

Orinda council ignoring residents

Orinda continues to proceed with its work on a Downtown Precise Plan, which is intended to add housing downtown by increasing density, despite a very recent survey showing that Orinda residents do not want more housing downtown. Orinda is doing so despite its statements that public feedback "will guide staff in the next steps" - statements that have now been exposed as false and misleading. The truth is that the public feedback is being ignored. Moreover, the DPP is costly, yet is proceeding despite a large revenue shortfall resulting from the pandemic.

Work on the DPP should be stopped, and the funds budgeted for that work should be reallocated to higher priorities.

In the online "Downtown Orinda Survey" completed May 31, 2020, fewer than 29% of the 703 Orinda residents who responded were in favor of adding housing (including mixed use). Housing ranked only 5th overall among priorities. Sixteen of the 18 email submissions to the May 26, 2020 Joint Meeting of the Planning Commission and Downtown Planning Subcommittee (comprised of Councilmembers Miller and Kosla) opposed additional housing downtown. Indeed, the Planning Department is so desperate that it is now seeking to gin up support from school age children. https://nextdoor.com/news_feed/?post=150428833 ("If you have school-aged children in Orinda, we would love to hear from them!" posted June 3, 2020.)

The DPP is an expensive project. Counting the expense of the many staff personnel working on it (five spoke at the Joint Meeting), the cost is at least \$1 million. Just in the last several weeks, the City has authorized consulting contracts totaling over \$300,000. Fortunately, these contracts include a right to cancel without cause.

The upcoming budget Mid-Cycle Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Budget Update on June 16, 2020 will be an excellent opportunity to stop work on the DPP and to reallocate funds to things the public does want -- fire prevention and infrastructure -- consistent with the available money.

Nick Waranoff
Orinda

To Lauren Rodriguez - Wow

Your letter in the May 27th edition of the Lamorinda Weekly said more clearly and eloquently what I have been feeling than anything I could have come up with. Well done!
I've been having a series of passionate, fruitless, discussions with people who feel that they should be "free" to get a haircut (or some other trivial outing) regardless of the pandemic. From now on I think I'll just give them your letter.

Jeff Peacock
Lafayette

Planning Commission and City Council ignore financial warnings

As a long-term resident, strong supporter of downtown organic development, participant in the 3-year PPRTF (Planning Process Review Task Force), and past planning commissioner, I was surprised to see members of the planning commission basically ignore substantial public input that suggested now was not the appropriate time to move forward with significant expenditures for a "Downtown Precise" plan. Reference, "Joint Planning Commission/Downtown Planning sub committee," May 26, 2020.
Well hidden from the public in numerous ways, and including substantial misinformation, the downtown development plans in reality are based on the Urban Land Institute's (ULI) recommendations that center on significant multi story condo/apartment development, which is necessary to meet economic goals of any large central development project. As ULI stated in their presentation, significant housing acts as the "value enhancer." Their presentation was based on six, five or six story buildings, at 40 units each, for a total of 240 units. Deniers can argue this is not the "Precise Plan," but fundamental financial development objectives require something very similar, and eventually these goals will be clear to the public.
Whether you agree or disagree with Organic Development (code compliant), vs. centralized multi-story condo/apartment development (non code compliant, 50' or 60' building heights, or more), now is not the time to divert the city's limited budget to yet more planning/code changing studies, involving substantial expenditures. It would seem, given the circumstances, that fire prevention, fuel mitigation, fire breaks, debris cleanup and other considerations, would be a far higher priority and a more appropriate use of our limited funds (already projected at \$1,000,000+ shortfall), as many residents recommended.
There is a history of asking for public input and then ignoring or discounting the public's input or even being told, we are wrong. It would be an interesting change to see if our local government (City management, Council, Commission, etc.) listen to and act on what the majority of residents want.

Chris Kniel
Orinda

A shout out for fuel reduction

We appreciate having the Lamorinda Weekly. It is a valuable resource which helps us keep up with local issues and opinions. Thank you! On April 29 we attended a Zoom meeting of the Moraga Orinda Fire District Board for the first time. We were aware of the formation of a committee between the Orinda City Council and the MOFD Board (as well as possibly the Moraga Town Council) to elevate the priority of the critical issue of fuel reduction. We were interested in how prioritization of wildfire prevention might be demonstrated in the discussion and actions of the Board. That evening there was Mayor Gee and Council member Dennis Fay in attendance along with unprecedented numbers of residents who expressed their community support for this prioritization of efforts and funding for wildfire prevention on all fronts. Other topics discussed that evening were covered in the recent issue of the Lamorinda Weekly but not the key, very important Board decisions that reflected an interest in wildfire prevention. Definitely a noteworthy part of the meeting and deserving of a shout out.

Kathie Bain and Andy Norrell
Orinda

Orinda's downtown planning efforts

The state is pushing all communities to help address the housing shortage and all communities, including Orinda should tailor their response to that pressure to create the most advantageous outcome for current as well as future residents. Orinda's downtown planning effort affords us the opportunity to address this in a thoughtful way. We should build on the community that we have, hopefully enticing others who love what Orinda is and want to add to it. There are many reasons why Orinda should be excited to welcome more people to live in our downtown.

Firstly, housing downtown greatly supports downtown vitality, helping to maintain a greater offering of shops and restaurants.

Second, many community members want an alternative to single-family housing. There are empty-nesters looking to downsize, families or individuals with a change of circumstance, those wanting a more walkable lifestyle, and those in the "boomerang" generation who grew up here and wish to return. Allowing for our community to remain intact, to sustain our social fabric and build upon that is a good that the city should promote.

Third, the Orinda School District has expressed the need to get creative in ways to compensate teachers given limited funds. The most impactful way to do this would be to provide housing dedicated to district teachers. The city should partner with the school board in achieving that goal.

Lastly, as developers include a percentage of below-market-rate units, the city should encourage units that suit the needs of families with school-aged children. There is no greater good that the city has to offer than access to our excellent schools and the schools have the room for it. They are expected to remain under-capacity in the most recent school board projections. Young families who value education are a great fit for this community and would add to our city.

I'm excited to see Orinda grow in this way.

Arran Schultz
Orinda

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[back](#)

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