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Outcry over proposed trail staging area, preschool in Art & Garden Center at Wilder

By Sora O'Doherty

As the Orinda city council's Wilder Subcommittee met to review whether or not the developers are meeting the requirements for the end of 2020, Wilder residents attended the video meeting to express continued objections to the trail staging area as well as to reiterate objections to the Orinda planning commission's approval two days earlier of the Countryhouse Memory Care facility and a preschool to operate out of the Art & Garden Center.

The subcommittee is composed of Vice Mayor Amy Worth and Council Member Nick Kosla. The city is also represented by attorney Fran Layton, who also attended the meeting.

The Red-Tailed Hawk staging area located at the far end of the Wilder development was originally the proposed site of the Art and Garden Center, and the intent was to draw the public into the valley, as the amenities included in the development agreement are intended to be for all Orinda residents as well as the public. However, earlier changes in the plans resulted in the Art and Garden Center being moved closer to the entrance to Wilder, adjacent to the four playing fields. The subcommittee agreed to discuss the issue but to postpone action until more information could be gathered.

The staging area is intended to provide some amenities, such as toilets and parking, to members of the public who wish to access the trail that begins at the foot of the valley. However, Wilder residents have been complaining that the area, even before development, is being used for illegal activities, including vandalism and graffiti, illegal parking and overnight camping. Orinda Police Chief David Cook also attended the meeting to address these concerns.

Mary Jo Ashby, chair of the Secure Wilder Committee, reported on specific incidents of graffiti, trespassing and alcohol use, as well as disturbances of the peace, loud parties with beer kegs, and bonfires. Another serious incident involved the lock on the emergency vehicle road gate used by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District being cut off and replaced with a private lock. Incidents have also been reported in the adjacent neighborhood of Lost Valley, which included vandalism of the PG&E substation, public urination, and alcohol use. Citing the installation of the trailhead as "a hazard to our community," Ashby recommended that the city council eliminate the trailhead altogether.

Cook told the subcommittee that all of the trails have seen an increase in unwanted activity. He said that the police will try to enforce the law and urged Wilder residents to report incidents, especially if they can report the incident while it is actually happening, to allow the police to respond. He urged them not to feel like they are a burden, but are actually welcome assistance to the force.

"I absolutely share the concerns of the Wilder Residents," Cook said. "The behavior out there is absolutely inappropriate; there is no way this should continue." He added that he is going to get East Bay Parks involved. Cook reported a total of 96 calls over the past three months for Wilder and the Edgewood neighborhood of Lost Valley, including a lot of suspicious vehicles, one theft from a porch and 17 ordinance violations, all of which involved use of the fields. There was also one misdemeanor assault reported. Cook said that the department has contacted parents, trying to get cooperation. OPD will call on the East Bay Park Region to do investigations. OPD cannot send officers out into the hills, Cook said, as they don't have 4-wheel drive vehicles. Worth agreed that there are a lot of demands on Orinda's two officers per shift. Cook said that the OPD tries to get up there a couple of times through each rotation. "I want to be proactive," he said. "It helps if Wilder residents are willing to call. If we have data points, we can target specific areas, specific times or days," he explained.

Bruce Yamamoto of Brook Street, the main developer at Wilder, reported on the progress of the trailhead, as well as the progress on other Wilder projects that are due to be completed by the end of the year, such as the sidewalks in the development. Currently signage is being prepared for the trailhead staging area and the site is being prepared for future construction. Yamamoto said that the bathroom provider is moving forward on permitting, storm drains, and the concrete pad for bathrooms. If everything progresses without a hitch, which Kosla joked never happens, the constructions could be completed by the middle of September.

Wilder residents also were critical of a plan approved by the planning commission July 14 to allow Orinda Parks and Recreation to lease out a portion of the Art and Garden Center to a preschool for a period of three years, which involves fencing off the tot lot play area. Parks and Rec Director Todd Trimble responded to questions, including whether or not the preschool would allow drop-off access via the Emergency Vehicle Access off of Bigleaf Road. Both Trimble and Assistant City Manager/Director of Public Works Larry Theis emphasized that drop-off and pickup of preschool children was to be done from the playfields parking lot and that the EVA would be closed off by a six-foot locked gate.

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