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Public comment continues at third Orinda Downtown Precise Plan community workshop

By Sora O'Doherty

Figure 1. ODS Proposed "Character Areas"

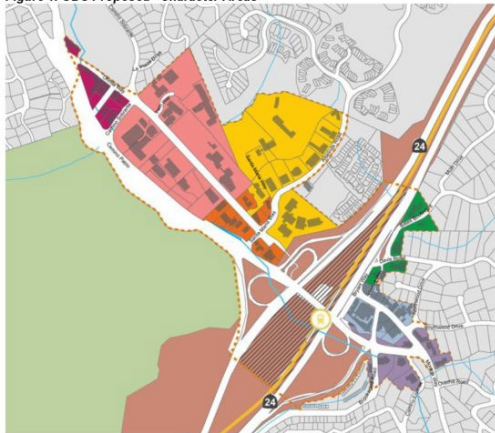


Figure 2 is provided as a preview of proposed Character Area 1 in the Village District. An in-depth discussion of each sub-area will be provided at the Community Workshop.

A joint meeting via Zoom teleconferencing of the Orinda Planning Commission and the city council downtown planning subcommittee was held July 28. This third workshop was intended to begin the conversation on objective design standards, residential density and building heights, according to the staff report presented by Planning Director Drummond Buckley and Associate Planning Winnie Mui.

Staff asked the commission and the committee to consider five questions: whether the maximum allowed dwelling units per acre in the downtown commercial district should be increased; whether residential use should be allowed in the downtown office district; what the overall maximum density should be for the village district; what the overall maximum density should be in the theatre district; and should the maximum allowable building height be increased in some areas.

After hearing a presentation by Opticos Design, Inc., the contractor for the downtown objective design standards, and public comment, it was decided that staff had

sufficient guidance to proceed without a formal vote.

Recent acts by the California legislature have moved toward limiting local control over housing, according to the staff report, culminating in Senate Bill 35 that last year eliminated most, if not all, of the design review discretion for projects that meet the eligibility requirements. Such projects are subject only to ministerial review that involves little or no personal judgment by the reviewing body, but instead applies fixed standards or objective measurements.

The city hopes to adopt objective design standards that would apply in such cases, which will "allow Orinda to specify the desired development aesthetics that align with the goals and vision of the downtown precise plan."

Attendees expressed concern that adding more residential density to downtown Orinda would pose a threat to public safety in the event of an emergency evacuation, an issue that would be included in the environmental impact report.

In regards to density, Buckley said, "It's a fact that the existing maximum density of 10 dwelling units per acre has never been utilized to construct any units." He noted that there has been almost no revitalization of downtown Orinda since the construction of Theatre Square in the mid-1980s. "One way to spur development is to allow higher density than currently allowed."

Another issue broached was the possibility of dedicating downtown housing to teachers and city employees. Dan DeBusschere suggested that adding 240 housing units could both fulfill that need as well as meet the new housing element requirement coming in 2021. While Orinda Union School District board member Jason Kaune said that the district is very interested in a teacher housing element, Council Member Inga Miller asked if there were any laws that allow the city to restrict housing to teachers. Buckley said that a community is allowed to filter out affordable housing to people who work in the community, but not just to teachers. He noted the largest employers in Orinda are the two school districts.

Pete Hassleman, a retired architect and member of Orinda Vision, urged the group to consider providing for contemporary pitched roofs that provide for various amenities, while Council Member Nick Kosla supported a variety of units, some smaller, some larger. He also questioned the 35-foot height limit, suggesting that it might promote cheaper types of buildings.

"The community may be in favor of higher buildings if they are higher quality," Commission member Ann Parnigoni said. Planning Commission Chair Brandyn Iverson strongly agreed that allowing more height in the right locations would allow more architectural buildings. Iverson concluded that there was a consensus recommendation of 25 dwelling units per acre in the downtown commercial district and 30 dwelling units per acre in the downtown office district with flexibility on height.

Iverson suggested that for the purposes of the EIR there might be flexibility to go to 45 feet, and maybe

more in certain areas. Commission member Robert Hubner said he likes flexibility but nobody in Orinda wants buildings 70 to 80 feet tall. At 50 feet, he suggested, you probably couldn't even tell the difference from 35.

Kosla also clarified that all current property owners and existing uses are grandfathered in, so there is no risk of them losing their businesses. Property owners Vickie and Pete Peterson, who are a part of the family group that owns the property where CVS is located said that while they all have deep, deep connections with Orinda, there has been no incentive to do anything with the buildings on the parcel, and no ability to get a clear vision of what could be done. Vickie Peterson said that they are "committed to revitalizing, not destroying, what we love."

Iverson welcomed comments by Miller who suggested that there is a possibility that allowing any residential units in the downtown office district might allow the state to "take it all over."

"Certain things," Miller said, "are triggered even if it is only one unit." That is going to be an issue at the city council, she concluded. Hubner noted that he wants to study the issue, but doesn't want to lose control over the area. Parnigoni was surprised that something so important to the process came up so late in the discussion.

Buckley said that a lot more detail can be provided when the matter comes before the city council.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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