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Letters to the editor

Not a new tax now. Please.

Our taxes are already very high. On Aug. 4 the City Council voted to put a 1% sales tax, lasting 20 years, on the ballot. The City says that this will generate \$2.4 million of revenue per year. This tax, the largest single tax in Orinda's history, will be imposed at a time of great financial uncertainty for both businesses and individuals, in the midst of a rampant pandemic.

The City plans to use these funds to maintain Orinda's public residential streets and some public storm drains. But it has ignored the private street resident's pleas that all Orinda streets be treated fairly. The City is calling this tax an "essential services" tax, but it is only "essential" to maintain 64 miles of public residential streets, not all 94 miles.

The City is also suggesting that possibly 5% of the tax may fund fire prevention but they will not commit to that. The tax will be a "general" tax. Once it is paid, the City can use it for anything it wishes. Conversely a five year parcel tax of \$150 would be committed to fuel reduction, would generate more funds, and could be proposed at any time. Alternatively, a general tax could prudently be delayed until 2022, when the current 1/2 cent tax expires. It is clear that fuel reduction is essential and popular, but it is being used as a sweetener for a very large money grab.

This is the wrong tax for the wrong uses at the wrong time.

All the City Council seems to understand is winning and losing. If that means making the City "lose" this time, so be it. It will only be a temporary loss which could generate an equitable win for everyone latter, even at the cost of delaying some fuel reduction for a year.

Charles Porges
Orinda

Downtown Orinda: Five Points for Consideration

The latest three meetings of the City Council's Downtown Subcommittee have provided thoughtful guidance for updating Orinda's aging Downtown and its Master Plan from 1987. Proposed changes to zoning, circulation (including traffic), and adherence to state mandates for housing are being carefully considered. Props to our city council, planning commission and staff.

Following are five points of opinion, taken from various voices at the meetings, that I support and hope to elevate to the public for further discussion, renderings/modeling, and review:

- (1) Re-examine Zoning Codes. Enforce Type I (restaurant and retail) zoning on primary streets: Moraga Way, Orinda Way from 25A to the Country Club bridge, and Camino Sobrante. Prioritize our Downtown's best access, visibility, and traffic-count areas to ensure retail and restaurant success. City consultants should render/model those corridors specifically, for public review.
- (2) Allow housing in the Downtown Office (DO) District with emphasis on parcels along the north side of Altarinda Road (near the Masonic Center, for reference). Allow mixed-use housing in the Downtown Commercial (DC) District only where larger or assembled parcels, along with building height set-backs and topography changes, mitigate the appearance of housing height/mass.
- (3) Prioritize redevelopment at the two "bookends" of our downtown: the Country Club block at the north end of the Village, and the CVS/ BevMo/Wells Fargo block at the south end of the Theater District. Each of these sites has sufficient acreage to support mixed-use housing and accommodate parking onsite. Each has a locational advantage as an entrypoint to our Downtown.
- (4) Leverage the city's in-lieu fees from 25A into a public/private partnership for a 2-3 level public parking garage, located in a central area to benefit all the small retailers in the Village.
- (5) Consider relinquishing the street of Avenida de Orinda, instead using it as a public space to improve upon the properties around it and for the community. Activate the current dead-end street into a walkable public plaza or ingress/egress to connect two vibrant commercial blocks.

Each of these points is worthy of ongoing discussion within the context of our downtown plan.

Marianne Moser
Orinda

Oppose Orinda's Proposed Sales Tax

Fair minded Orindans should reject the City Council's proposed 20-year, one percent sales tax for the following reasons:

- 1) Now, in the middle of a once-in-a-century medical pandemic and associated economic turmoil is NOT the time to embark on Orinda's largest-ever (over \$60 million) infrastructure program. While many may be able to absorb the average cost of \$340 a year; not all will be able to.
- 2) The tax is being sold as a "safety" tax (by the support group Safer Orinda) but it is not. So far, out of the total \$60 million cost, the City has only identified \$500-750,000 going to wildfire prevention. Since MOFD refuses to provide adequate fire prevention services, the City needs to do a lot more than this. Until it figures out how to and is willing to dedicate funds for this purpose, no new taxes should be voted for.
- 3) The City is calling the tax an "essential services" tax. It is nothing of the sort. The majority of the tax will

go to maintain 64 miles of public residential streets (home to 4 of 5 City Council members). If the maintenance of a residential street is an "essential" service; why does the City continue to withhold that service from the 30 miles of streets, home to 1,500 Orinda families, it calls "private" because it will not allow them into the public road network?

4) The City currently has over \$3 million per year at its disposal for infrastructure and wildfire fuel reduction. It does not need a new tax for this at this inappropriate time.

This is the wrong tax and the wrong time to impose it. Tell the City Council this by voting no on this tax. For more information see www.OrindaRoadFacts.info

Steve Cohn
Orinda

Improve walkability through downtown development

We urge our fellow citizens to support - quietly or vocally - but persistently - revitalizing our small downtown in Orinda. Our City is at last seriously starting to move on this issue, well, to WALK-the-talk. We two are 45-year residents of Orinda. So, we are hardly "Young Turks" supporting hasty change. Indeed, real change to our City will be, should be, slow, careful. Improvements will realistically come only when, first, the "plate is set" by the City Council, Planning Commission and city departments, then second, when private owners perceive that the "rules of the game" will permit them to meaningfully spend money to improve their properties - and our community - or to sell to those who will. Improvements that we hope for will be seen most vividly over time - by our children and grandchildren.

The City Council plans to arrive at some good decisions in 2021. Long way off? No, not in the context of the City's lack of action in the past decades.

The Past (tired, drowsy): In a quarter of century, Orinda has had no new buildings in its commercial area. Not since Theater Square. Only two . two! . of the remaining commercial buildings have been renovated since then. Stagnation. The City has a well-deserved reputation of being anti-commercial improvement. To the contrary, in our view, livable, active city downtowns in America are always, gradually, persistently renewing themselves.

The Future: Orinda Village in particular, is too far "apart." It can and should be more "walkable." Walkability raises property values, increases commerce and - vitally - enhances a sense of community. "Connect Orinda" has made some positive steps.

But, we can do more: Careful density changes for residential, business units. Enhance, encourage mixed-use properties. In the distant future, open up San Pablo creek to viewing, walking. Such will help with walkability, community. Indeed, we have already two large communities downtown who can walk. Eden Housing residents and the Orinda Senior Villagers. But, as well, we need newly-retired and "workforce" housing (teachers, police, fire personnel). The opportunity is right here. Right now.

Give voice to hope. Give voice to renewal. Get ready to walk . our emerging town!

Dave and Sandy Anderson
Orinda

Thumbs Down for the Downtown Precise Plan

The recent letter from Kirsten Larsen of What's Up Downtown Orinda (published Aug. 5) manifests a lack of understanding of how state housing laws affect Orinda.

First, the Downtown Precise Plan, which will increase density and raise the height limit (possibly to 70 feet) has now been exposed as a plan to increase housing density downtown, in the hope that retail will follow. Contrary to Ms. Larsen's prophecy, the DPP will not attract "high level development which will in turn entice an attractive mix of new businesses and increase vitality in our Downtown District." Instead, the DPP will attract housing developers bent on maximizing profit, who will do so by making 10% of the new housing units affordable. Such a project will not be "high level" but instead will be subject only to objective design standards. Most of the units will be small studios or one bedroom. If the project is within one-half mile of BART (approximately to the fire station), the City cannot require the developer to add any parking. The retail spaces at street level in the new project will likely remain empty. Retail is dying, and it seems likely that new businesses, and shoppers, will be deterred by the resulting lack of parking caused by adding hundreds of units without parking. Meanwhile, our existing small businesses will have been demolished, and their owners will have had their livelihood permanently destroyed.

Second, the DPP will not "allow Orinda to make decisions on how to incorporate housing into our Downtown district in a thoughtful way that is in keeping with the City's unique personality and aesthetic." In fact, under existing SB 35, it won't be long before a new project containing 10% affordable housing is considered "by right," which means it is entitled to streamlined, ministerial processing subject only to objective zoning and design standards. The only "decisions" that will be made will be whether those objective standards are met; "thoughtful" consideration and subjective judgment is banned under SB 35. Increasing the density and raising the height limit will irrevocably change whatever "personality" Orinda has, and certainly will change Orinda's "aesthetic," for the worse.

Orinda's downtown will not be in the hands of its citizens but instead in the hands of developers.

Nick Waranoff
Orinda

A vote for Carl Anduri

I encourage you to vote for Carl Anduri for City Council in the upcoming election, and am writing to let you

know why I think Lafayette would benefit from his leadership. I have deep admiration for Carl. Some of you who have recently moved to our City may not be aware that he has a proven and well-respected record as both City Councilmember and Mayor of Lafayette. For 10 years, from 2002 - 2012, Carl served on the Lafayette City Council. He was Mayor in 2005 and 2011. Prior to that time, he served six years on the Lafayette Planning Commission. Carl retired from the City Council when the demands of his job - being president of a global network of law firms - increased. He has recently retired, and is willing to again commit his time and tremendous skills to help guide our community.

Carl has many assets. Among them are his thoughtful, balanced approach to problem-solving. He listens to all sides, takes great time in researching issues and is clear and respectful in his communication. He has proven to be fiscally responsible. He cares about people, the community and our wonderful rich environment, and is open to new ideas. In 2004, as chairperson of the Acalanes High School Science Department, I was granted funding by LASF (now LPIE) to create an Environmental Science program. Students in the newly created course wanted to become more involved in local policy. Carl came to my classroom and met with students, where they discussed creating a Climate Action Plan for Lafayette. This meeting led to the creation of an Environmental Task Force, which exists to this day to help guide City policy.

During the next few years, Lafayette will create a new General Plan. And during this time of pandemic, we will be faced with unforeseen challenges as a community. I will miss the valuable service of Mike Anderson and Steven Bliss, who have recently decided to step down as councilmembers, and am grateful to Carl for offering to step back into City leadership.

Janet Thomas
Lafayette

Orinda private roads - What is fair?

Orinda has been hearing a lot recently from a vocal group of its private road homeowners. This group argues it is "unfair" that private road homeowners must pay taxes for the maintenance of Orinda's public roads AND pay to maintain their private roads.

Obviously, no one in Orinda was compelled to purchase a home on a private road. The fact that a private road homeowner has this dual and "unfair" obligation presumably was (or should have been) taken into account in determining whether to purchase, and what to pay for, their home.

Consider, for example, fairness in the context of Wilder. Orinda approved Wilder on the condition that the development's homeowners, via their HOA, be solely responsible for all future road maintenance in Wilder. If Orinda had instead agreed to assume the cost of maintaining these roads, the fees charged to the developer would have increased substantially. In turn, the original purchase price of each home in Wilder would have increased materially.

I don't think it can be credibly argued that it would now be i) "fair" to the city to give up, for nothing in return, the road maintenance arrangement it bargained for when approving the Wilder development or ii) "fair" to non-Wilder homeowners to now increase their taxes in order to relieve Wilder residents of their obligation to maintain Wilder's roads.

With apologies to my friends who live on private roads,

Jim Evert
Orinda

Donate to the Food Bank

The pandemic and the recession have dramatically increased the need for emergency food. The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano buys a significant amount of the food it distributes, so a reliable stream of revenue is even more important now. I have signed up via the Food Bank website to have my credit card charged every month for an amount I am comfortable with. This is the most convenient way to help the Food Bank serve 270,000 people a month during this time. Please consider doing this. The need is great and the need is now.

Dale Walwark
Moraga

Vote Gina Dawson for Lafayette City Council

I am thrilled that Gina Dawson is running for the Lafayette City Council. She led our community's effort to save hundreds of mature trees and heritage oaks from PG&E's chainsaws, and provided jaw-dropping evidence of PG&E's exposed gas pipelines and neglected maintenance. Gina pushed for transparency, integrity, and follow-through in her efforts to protect the safety of residents. She is a strong community organizer who knows how to be appropriately tough on the issues yet kind and respectful. I trust her judgment, admire her integrity and urge Lafayette residents to seat her on Lafayette's City Council on Nov. 3.

MaryJo Cass
Lafayette resident 20 years

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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