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Orinda hires consultant to assess economic aspects of housing on downtown development

By Sora O'Doherty

How much housing in downtown Orinda is needed to drive an upscale grocery store to open there? More restaurants? Other amenities? Those are some of the estimates that the Downtown Subcommittee found they lacked in trying to come up with a draft Environmental Impact Report for the Orinda downtown precise plan.

The downtown subcommittee put out a request for bids for an economic analysis, and then reviewed the applications it received at a Sept. 30 public meeting. After hearing presentations from three firms, the subcommittee recommended that the city council authorize a contract with Economic & Planning Systems, an Oakland firm, and on Oct. 6 the council selected EPS for the project, beating out Lisa Wise Consulting and BAE Urban Economic for the contract.

EPS has been around since 1983 serving Oakland, Contra Costa County and Alameda County submarkets, and specializing in real estate market and development feasibility studies and fiscal analysis. Principal Jason Moody has been with the firm for over 20 years, and will be assisted by Ben Sigmund, who has 20 years of experience in land use economics, and Kate Traynor who previously worked for HUD and was a consultant for the San Francisco board of supervisors.

Mentioning that the firm worked for the city of Danville, looking at upzoning their old town and what kinds of incentives would be required, Sigman and Moody responded to questions by downtown subcommittee member Nick Kosla, including how many residential units are required to draw retail and restaurants, as neighboring Lafayette has done.

EPS representatives pointed to work on 4th Street in Berkeley. Moody said that it took a while to get 4th Street right, to subsidize an anchor draw. Sigman explained that ever since the dissolution of redevelopment agencies, cities have used all manner of density bonuses, and EPS does test bonus programs on both public and private sector projects.

When Kosla said that Orinda is looking to inform its downtown specific plan, Moody replied, "You are talking our language!"

"This is what we do," he continued. "We've worked on three or four now, providing fiscal analysis, cost and benefit, affordability, costs, public safety and maintenance. We provide a robust fiscal analysis package," he said, adding, "We can do it easily because we've done it so many times before."

When Mayor Darlene Gee asked Moody what his thoughts are for when we go back to normal times after the very unprecedented time in the world of COVID, he replied: "Retail is the eye of the storm, transforming significantly in a very short time." He actually thinks that there is a silver lining for smaller communities.

"Early indications are that when people are working at home, they do their shopping in their own communities more, including lunchtime expenditures and local errands." Still, he recognizes that retailers who haven't fully embraced the internet are going to be in trouble. Streetscape is becoming more important, he opined, and Orinda has an advantage in that it already has a nice, walkable downtown. Vice Mayor Amy Worth agreed that a big factor in economic viability is having outdoor space, and speculated that during a pandemic, people are more comfortable staying in their own community.

Although city council approval was required for the EPS contract, it is not required for smaller contracts like one with a creek consultant. Planning Director Drummond Buckley noted that the city has not spent any money yet on the creek, but it's a long overdue expenditure and not a tremendous cost: "We are really giving the city the most bang for its buck."

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[back](#)

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