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## Orinda residents seem willing to trade off taller buildings for community benefits

By Sora O'Doherty



Image provided

public disliked. The presentation, which is available online to the public, included many graphics illustrating set-backs from the street, building step backs in higher floors, plazas and courtyards.

Optics identified seven character areas, four in the village area and three in the Theatre district that included both the Downtown Commercial (DC) and the Downtown Office (DO) zones.

The concept of "character areas" is that different parts of Orinda's downtown are suitable for differing treatments, and that a more pleasing overall effect could be accomplished by not having just one standard for all of the downtown.

When asked how much downtown residential development is needed to drive retail development in Orinda, Jason Moody, managing principal of EPS, said he was not optimistic that adding retail square footage could drive the type of retail development that Orinda wants. There would not likely be sufficient residential development to change the fundamental dynamics, he said, adding that success would be affected by Orinda's small population and nearby competition from Lafayette and Walnut Creek, both easily within reach of Orinda residents.

However, he said the Downtown Precise Plan has good bones and community attributes, and that success could come from innovative tenancing and "place-making." Much of the discussion centered on using the offer of more height in exchange for community benefits, which included design features such as plazas, or area improvements, such as creek restoration. Although one speaker said that creek restoration is not a priority in Orinda, several other speakers expressed support for the idea of daylighting San Pablo Creek as it runs through downtown Orinda.

In terms of mixed use developments that combine retail and residential use, horizontal mixed use seemed to garner more support than vertical mixed use, with commenters suggesting that they favored residential development behind a facade of retail developments. Several lots that stretch from, for example, Moraga Way to the creek, or Moraga Road to Camino Pablo were suggested as areas that could have retail facing the street and residential development behind. An increase in allowable building height from the current 35 feet or two and a half stories to potentially 55 feet or four or five stories was discussed.

Council Member Nick Kosla urged that the limits not be defined specifically as to stories, as stories can vary within the same height limit. Council Member Inga Miller asked if it would be possible, for example, to go up to 55 feet from the bottom of the lot currently housing BevMo, or was it suggested that the corner of that lot at Moraga Way, currently occupied by CVS go up to 55 feet. Pellegrini explained that they are not making a hard recommendation at this time, but that frontage along Brookwood would be appropriate for taller buildings. Pellegrini also said that three- to four-story buildings would not severely impact views, but that the council could consider extra height being allowed where some community benefit is provided by the developer.

The EPS consultant also pointed out that most of the lots in Orinda already have existing development that provides a revenue stream for owners. "As a rule of thumb," he said, "a FAR (floor area ratio) below 0.5 indicates that a property is under-utilized and ripe for redevelopment." There are many such properties in downtown Orinda, he added, and other than the senior housing built in 2014, the last new buildings in Orinda were built in 1989, over 30 years ago. The city's current limits of 2.5 stories and 10 units per acre are probably a major hurdle to development, he concluded.

The EPS presentation also focused on the economics of parking, which he said can make or break a project. While most commenters favored wider sidewalks that could accommodate outdoor dining, for example, Moody noted this could come at the expense of parking. He added that Orinda does not offer an in lieu option for residential development.

Paul Ugenti, the developer of the planned new development at 25A Orinda Way, The Station,

The Orinda city council and planning commission held a joint meeting Nov. 19 to host a well-attended workshop on downtown character areas as part of the continuing effort to develop a downtown precise plan. The city's two consultants, Optics, working on the objective design standards, and Economic & Planning Systems, Inc., working on the economic feasibility study, gave presentations, after which the workshop was broken down into breakout groups for discussion. Each group was attended by a member of the city council or the planning commission as well as having someone taking notes. When the workshop reconvened, reports of the breakout groups were given, and there was further discussion, questions and comments by the civil groups and the public.

Optics principal Stefan Pellegrini focused on how buildings could be taller but not create a Manhattan canyon effect, which many on the council and in the

commented that the only effective way to develop retail is to have housing. He said that parcels in downtown Orinda are very large and there are very few owners in town. He said he is excited about higher density and suggested developments that drive more daytime traffic, more restaurants, and more housing for those who want to downsize or for first-time owners.

Local developer Bruce Burrows said that he is not a fan of mixed use, but likes the idea of housing in downtown Orinda. He agreed that retail success is more likely to come from innovative tenanting and creative retail marketing, with room for residential behind retail.

Both presentations from the workshop can be viewed at <https://cityoforinda.box.com/v/CharacterAreaWorkshopPPT>

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