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Orinda follows other Bay Area cities; combines housing element with downtown planning

By Sora O'Doherty

Given the overlap between the Orinda Downtown Precise Plan, being developed by staff, and the upcoming housing element, the city council agreed to streamline the process by combining certain elements of the two plans. This should result in some cost savings, but also in a delay of completion of the DPP. The council also decided to expand its current downtown development subcommittee to additionally cover the housing element. The two council members who are currently on the downtown development subcommittee, Inga Miller and Nick Kosla, were willing to take on the additional HE work. The council also approved the request for proposals for a consultant on the draft housing element.

Orinda staff have been working on the DPP for some time now. The city initially thought to outsource the project, but failing to receive satisfactory responses to a request for proposals, it was decided that staff could undertake the work. The DPP is intended to establish objective building standards for downtown Orinda. The plan is part of an effort to develop Orinda's downtown but is also intended to put in place objective standards that would give the city some control in the event that California passes legislation removing some planning discretion from local government.

The state requires that the HE be updated every eight years, with each city, town and county receiving a new RHNA number (the Regional Housing Needs Allocation) or the number of new homes that must be planned for during the planning period. The current HE is the fifth cycle, adopted in May of 2015. Orinda's RHNA number for the planning period 2015-23 was 227 units. The sixth cycle must be adopted by January 2023 for the planning period of 2023 through 2031. Orinda's draft RHNA number is 1,359 units, although a final number is expected later this year.

Staff suggested to the city council that because the elements of the HE and the DPP are either overlapping or complimentary, the two projects could be coordinated. In particular, the California Environmental Quality Act analysis and the safety element could be coordinated, and the downtown subcommittee could be expanded to include the HE, in addition to the DPP. One CEQA analysis and one Environmental Impact Report will be less costly, without the risk of duplicate efforts, and housing opportunity sites for both the DPP and the HE could be coordinated.

The council agreed with staff. An RFP will be issued by the end of the month, and there will be a joint workshop of the city council and the planning commission on May 11 to include such topics as an introduction to the housing element, a more refined schedule for the HE and the DPP, and preliminary analysis of the RHNA units and sites inventory. The workshop will be led by Jennifer Gastelum of Placeworks, who is currently assisting the city with HE pre-work such as site analysis.

At an earlier meeting on April 13, Orinda Planning Director Drummond Buckley introduced the staff report. He explained that work on the DPP started in January of last year and completion was expected by the end of this year or early next year. Following the issuance of the RFP, staff expects a consultant to begin work late June or early July. Factoring in a potential four-month review period by the California Department of Housing and Community Development, the HE must be adopted by December 2022. New city manager David Biggs told the council that the consultant hired will stay up to date on legislation to watch for potential impacts on the HE.

In public comment, Nick Warranoff emphasized that coordinating the DPP with the HE was his idea. "Given the overwhelming clarity of the presentation, coordination is the better option," he said, adding, "One could be surprised that it took a private citizen to suggest it."

Mayor Amy Worth pointed out that the housing element is an unfunded state mandate, which means that while communities are required by the state to comply, they receive no funding to do so by the state.

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