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Orinda community park moves slowly toward enhancement

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda staff brought the issue of updating the city's main park back before the city council Oct. 5 with the intention of getting ready to apply for additional grant funding. Plans for the park were last addressed in 2018, following approval of the capital improvement plan for the park in 2013. Council Member Inga Miller, formerly a member of the Parks and Rec Commission, noted that each time the issue comes before the city council, it is a different group of elected officials.

Director of Parks and Recreation Todd Trimble presented the item to the council. He summed up the history of the project since it was last before the council in 2018. After the council received the conceptual design, parks and rec was asked to address the concerns of the community, especially the concerns of tennis players and the Orinda Starlight Village Players, who have been using the amphitheater in the park for 38 seasons of local drama. The plans have incorporated changes, including retaining the tennis practice wall, eliminating the proposed bocce courts, and maintaining the box office and concession storage for the Starlight players. It was the intention at one point to keep the existing restroom and add another one, but that is one of the areas now being reviewed.

Eliminating a second restroom would reduce costs by up to \$400,000, thus reducing the the overall project costs from an estimated \$2.4 million down to \$2.2 million. The city has obtained a grant under Proposition 68 to replace the existing restroom with an expanded one, that would incorporate in the same building the box office and concession storage area for the theater.

Another goal for the park is to replace the current gazebo with a band stand to make it more of a performing area. Staff proposes that the renovations be performed in stages.

Miller observed that two park commissioners were in the audience and asked how the proposed new building would affect the entrance to the amphitheater. City manager David Biggs explained that there would be a more direct entrance to the amphitheater, but it would still be buffered from view by the box office/restroom building. The new building would house three bathroom stalls, an increase over the current two. Biggs asked Trimble to reach out to the Starlight Players, and Trimble responded that he has done so and that they are pleased with this modification.

Parks & Rec commissioner Arran Schultz, who spoke during public comments, expressed some concern about the accessibility of the restroom under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). She said that she would love to see a request for proposals to a larger group of landscape architects. "It's really important to do things in the right order," she said, "so we don't have to rip anything out, and so that we get the right result."

Council Member Darlene Gee said that she was very supportive of going forward to apply for additional grant money, and appreciated Schultz being present and offering comments. Miller suggested a joint workshop with the Parks & Rec Commission to get feedback from park users, and Council Member Nick Kosla pointed out that in the last iteration of the downtown precise plan there is a parklike area directly across from the park.

Mayor Amy Worth, in summing up, agreed that it is imperative to move forward on the park. She said that it is a fantastic park, serving a huge range of ages, from residents of the two nearby senior housing facilities to children. She added that the park is now 50 years old and was built with volunteers and fundraising. She agreed that the park's real estate is very tight, and that there is wisdom in not using it for another bathroom.

Worth attested that the bathrooms currently work, from her 40 years of experience taking little kids to the bathroom. She suggested that the park is a tremendous opportunity for private fundraising, in the same way that the community raised the money for the library.

"People just love their community," she said, "and with COVID we've realized how important public spaces are." She supported the idea of a joint workshop to bring in younger members of the community. She complimented Trimble and his staff for doing such a great job. "We want to do this so we can really raise community support," she concluded. "This is more than conceptual, it really addresses concerns." And personally, she added, "I want to lobby for benches for grandmothers and some landscaping for shade." The city council approved the item to allow staff to obligate money by the required deadline.

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[back](#)

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