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Laborious work continues on updating Orinda housing element to meet huge challenges

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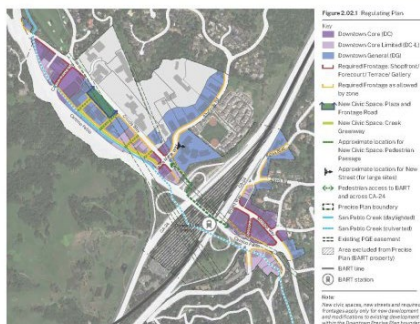


Figure 2.02.1 Regulating Plan, www.planorinda.com/

As the population of the state of California edges ever closer to 40 million, concerns about providing housing continues to be a major issue at both the state and local level. Every local government is required by the state to have a "housing element" in the general plan and it is required to be updated every eight years. While local governments are not required to actually provide housing, they are required to make certain that local zoning provides the possibility of building a certain number of housing units. This number is assigned to local governments in the Bay Area by the Association of Bay Area Governments.

ABAG is offering a number of free licenses to an online public engagement tool, known as A Balancing Act, and Orinda has been awarded one of the licenses. The tool, expected to be launched soon, allows the public to offer comments and suggestions on proposed site inventory.

Orinda is now in the process of preparing for the next housing element update for the next period, the city's 6th cycle, which will cover the period from Jan. 31, 2023 through Jan. 31, 2031. For each cycle, localities are assigned a Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) number, which is the number of units that a housing element must plan for. For the upcoming 6th cycle, Orinda has been assigned 1,359 units, broken down by income level and number of units as follows: very low, 372; low 215; moderate 215; and above moderate, 557. This represents a huge jump up from the 5th cycle, when Orinda's RHNA goal was just 227 new housing units.

Planning for the housing element is made more complex by the constant stream of legislation (and some litigation) at the state level. The subcommittee suggested that the council not rely on Senate Bill 9 units to meet its RHNA because it is unknown how many SB 9 units will be produced. (SB 9 is a bill recently signed by the governor that will become effective on Jan. 1, 2022 and allows two units on single-family zoned lots as well as easing restrictions on lot splits). Instead of SB 9 units, the city should count more ADUs, the subcommittee suggested. "ADUs are an important part of Orinda's RHNA," the staff report said, "and they will continue to be a large part of the housing element."

Orinda has decided to combine planning for the upcoming housing element with upcoming planning for downtown development. On Nov.16, the city council received a staff report and an update from contractor Placeworks which has been hired to help the city with both downtown development and the housing element. The downtown planning and housing element subcommittee met on Oct. 18 to introduce the housing sites inventory. In the staff report to the city council, feedback from the subcommittee included some matters for the council's consideration. The presentation by Placeworks was shared by Jennifer Gastelum, Eli Krispi and Cynthia Walsh.

The subcommittee also suggested not including the BART parking lot in the 6th cycle given other planning efforts and the limited capacity of the city to prepare a plan for the BART parking lot at this time. However, it was also noted that public comments favored including the BART parking lots in the sites inventory and would like to see some of the RHNA sites currently located in downtown Orinda dispersed between downtown and the BART parking lots to reduce density downtown.

Public comments also focused on fire risks and minimizing vehicle miles traveled. One resident suggested that Orinda Country Club, which is not included in the upcoming Downtown Precise Plan, looks like an ideal location for multifamily housing. At a Nov. 9 planning commission study session, public comments included the desire to see more low-income units in southeast Orinda near schools rather than concentrated downtown. The public has expressed concerns that the aging population is being priced out of Orinda, and that there is a growing need for more affordable housing for seniors and others.

The briefing included additional strategies to meet the city's RHNA, including rezoning church sites to allow for residential units with increased density to allow building more housing units on church property. The BART parking lots, which total approximately 26 acres, could be rezoned for high-density development. The lots are owned by CalTrans. Other sites being considered for rezoning include sites owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District and/or the Orinda Union School District, which has indicated that they are interested in housing development for school employees. There is a vacant 3.87 acre-site north of Sleepy Hollow that could be rezoned for high-density housing. Although currently not accessible from a road, it is

adjacent to a vacant EBMUD site of 27.33 acres that is accessible from Bear Creek Road. Both sites are currently zoned for residential use, which allows one single-family residence and one ADU.

Of considerable concern to residents of Orinda, among others, is the safety issue of increasing density in areas that have elevated risks of wildfires. Placeworks is also helping the city to update its safety element in accordance with state law. Updates must show and assess evacuation routes and evacuation-constrained areas. Some of the official hazards in Orinda include fires, floods earthquakes and landslides, severe weather, droughts, extreme heat and air quality and "human health hazards," which seem to be substances, activities or conditions that are known to have the potential to cause acute or chronic illness, injury, or death. Public commenter Nick Waranoff urged the council to invoke public safety provisions to restrict building in the city. Also in public comments the council was asked about evacuation plans and the consequences of not meeting RHNA requirements.

For more information, visit www.planorinda.com/ or www.surveymonkey.com/r/VBJN9W5

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