



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published March 2nd, 2022

Orinda digs into planning for next housing element cycle

By Sora O'Doherty

With a much higher number of housing units to provide for in the next cycle of the Housing Element than the last, Orinda's city council gave serious consideration to a staff update on Feb. 15. In addition to the staff report, the council received a presentation by its consultant, Placeworks.

Planning Director Drummond Buckley told the council to expect the draft Housing Element at the end of March. Buckley also had a presentation about potential sites outside the downtown area and on the subject of density bonuses.

Orinda has been assigned 1,359 Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) units for the 6th cycle Housing Element, up by 1,132 from the current housing cycle requirement of 227 units. Orinda exceeded its RHNA number for the fifth cycle, with 291 total building permits having been issued. The Housing Element, which will be in effect for eight years, must be adopted before January 31, 2023. Staff recommends adding an additional 25% buffer, bringing the total number up to 1,506, which would include 734 units of very low to low-income housing, 215 units of moderate housing, and 557 units of above moderate housing.

The Housing Element, which is required by state law for all cities, towns and counties in California, does not require government to build housing, but to provide for the possibility of housing with planning and zoning. Jennifer Gastalum of Placeworks explained that the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) has really been ramping up enforcement beginning in southern California. She also explained that the effects of new laws on the Housing Element is not yet known, partially because promised guidance from HCD is not yet available. These new laws include SB 8, the Housing Crisis Act Extension, and SB 9, under which up to two primary units will be allowed by right on all single-family-zoned lots. Although this could potentially double the number of potential new housing units, the city cannot rely on SB 9 units until the HCD guidance becomes available.

Orinda has existing residentially zoned sites that can be counted in the sites inventory without any rezoning, including 64 units at Santa Maria Church and 583 currently vacant residentially-zoned sites. In addition, the planned Vista Verde Senior Housing project of 52 units is pending approval and the approved Wilder CountryHouse Memory Care project would provide another 38 units. That project recently withstood a court challenge, (see story Feb. 16) but may be subject to further litigation prior to breaking ground.

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) are estimated based on previous building permit history. This allows the city to add a total of 64 ADU units to their count, which still leaves a shortfall of 707 housing units that need to be found in the city and rezoned.

In November 2021, staff presented a number of potential sites to the council that can be rezoned in order to meet the RHNA, and made an online tool available to the public to allow them to offer their views on apportioning the remaining RHNA among the potential sites. These sites include the area covered by the upcoming downtown precise plan, including the downtown commercial and office zoned districts. There are four churches in Orinda that have large-surface parking lots, as well as the eastern and western parking lots for BART. Orinda Union School District has two potential sites, one an undeveloped portion of the Miramonte High School property, and the other a vacant portion of the Sleepy Hollow Elementary School property. However, the latter site may only be accessed via a vacant parcel on Bear Creek Road, owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District. That site could potentially also be developed concurrently with the Sleepy Hollow site.

The church sites, excluding the ones currently either approved or pending approval, could account for another 126 units. The OUSD sites could potentially account for another 235 units, and government-owned sites could potentially provide another 1,548 units. However, over 1,000 of those units would be on the BART parking lots and, after considerable discussion, those sites were deemed inappropriate for the next housing cycle, although they could well be used in a future housing cycle.

In response to public input, staff recommended lowering assumed building heights from 55 to 45 feet and decreasing assumed building density from 85 dwelling units per acre to 30.

In response to questions about the potential for housing on the BART parking lot sites, Buckley explained that Orinda BART is unique because the land is actually owned by Caltrans, and the Orinda station is categorized as an automobile dependent station. Developing housing on the site could result in very few parking spaces remaining. Gastelum added that there is no shovel-ready plan for housing on the BART sites, so recommended not including them in this cycle.

Economic consultant Jason Moody was asked about how the housing element might affect the financial development of downtown. Council Member Nick Kosla wondered, "Do we have to turn our whole downtown into a housing development, and if we do, will we get any of the benefits we want?" Moody responded, "I don't think your entire downtown is going to be converted into housing," adding, "It is particularly difficult to build housing where there are existing viable uses."

One issue that needed to be decided was whether or not the city should do the required rezoning before Jan. 31. Council Member Amy Worth said, "It's really important that we show good faith to HCD," and agreed that the city should proceed with the rezoning by Jan. 31. Worth also said that she would reach out to Caltrans about their parcel for potential housing.

City Manager David Biggs thanked the council. "It's great that we are getting people to engage," he said, adding that the goal is to have something that HCD will approve. "We need to make a good faith effort and, at the end of the day, come up with something that works."

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA