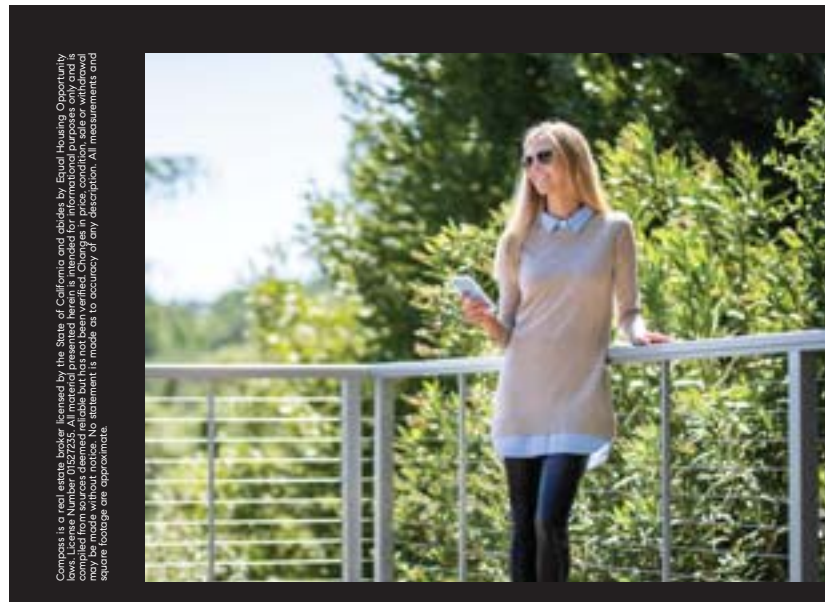




See public meetings schedule on this pages and check online for agendas, meeting notes and announcements  
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## Council hears about Caltrans plans for maintaining Highway 24 corridor



Photo Sora O'Doherty

By Sora O'Doherty

Once again, Orinda eyes a balancing act, this time between fire safety and maintaining the scenic highway designation for Highway 24. Shawn Casteel, Caltrans Agricultural Biologist and Acting Senior Environmental Planner, presented an update to the Orinda City Council on fuel mitigation work in the Orinda corridor on Feb. 15. He explained Caltrans' expanded approach to vegetation management and answered questions put by the council.

Casteel said that a new part of their program is an annual workshop for Caltrans to get input from fire departments. In public comment, Charles Porges asked if the workshop were open to the public. Casteel got back to the city after the meeting and confirmed that the workshop is, in fact, not open to the public.

Another new element of

the area where 74% of fires start (per Caltrans data)," Winnacker said.

During the council meeting, the question was raised whether Highway 24 was protected from having billboards by its status as a scenic highway. The answer was that while that is true so long as a highway is deemed to be scenic, changes in the environment of the highway might endanger its scenic status, and, in that case, billboards would become a possibility along the roadside.

Casteel laid out Caltrans' workflow. Beginning with a workshop on March 2, the annual vegetation control plan will be due on April 1. Annual tree inspections will follow in mid-June. Casteel compared the project to managing a really big farm. Caltrans is responsible for over 40,000 acres. The portion of Highway 24 that traverses Orinda is approximately four miles long.

Vice Mayor Inga Miller and Council Member Amy Worth both spoke about how important it is to the city of Orinda to maintain the scenic highway status for Highway 24, (as well as Highway 13, which was not under discussion). Miller said that she "wants to make sure that we know about anything that threatens the scenic highway rating for Highway 24 and that we take actions to maintain our visual corridor without billboards." Worth asked about the status of oak trees, to which Casteel replied that oak trees are a valued tree for Caltrans, and it wants to preserve them.

Worth agreed that oaks perform very well in fires, as opposed to non-native trees. She asked if the scenic highway designation precluded

billboards. That question was taken up by Sheryl Sablan, Caltrans environmental maintenance office chief, who explained that it is all about maintaining the scenic character of the highway. "If we clear cut it, it would take us out of the scenic highway designation," she said. "That is one of the reasons why we don't want to do that."

Council Member Darlene Gee wondered about longer-term replacement of vegetation in addition to fuel reduction and maintenance, but she was referred to Caltrans' landscape architecture department for such inquiries.

Orinda Mayor Dennis Fay acknowledges the importance of using Highway 24 as a fire break. "It would be nice to know when you are going to do it, the time frame, which types of trees will be removed," he said, adding, "basically, what you are going to do and when you are going to do it." Casteel replied that after the preparation of a fuel reduction action plan by the contractor, a detailed list of work to be performed will be available. Caltrans is currently working through the process of selecting a contractor.

Chief Winnacker, in comments after the meeting, noted that "the California Streets and Highways Code does not appear to address the removal of ground fuels and dead trees as grounds for revocation of the Scenic Highway designation. This has previously been stated by Caltrans' representatives, specifically that the scope of work they are undertaking would not be grounds for a review of Highway 24's inclusion in Section 263.3 of the Streets and Highway Code."

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## Orinda digs into planning for next housing element cycle

... continued from Page A1

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."

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	<b>City Council Regular Meeting:</b> Tuesday, March 15, 7 p.m. By Teleconference Only	<b>Planning Commission</b> Tuesday, March 8, 7 p.m. By Teleconference Only	<b>Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission</b> Wednesday, March 9, 6:30 p.m. By Teleconference Only
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