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Friends of Orinda Creeks, Planning Director explore hurt feelings, compromise on DPP

By Sora O'Doherty

Rejecting suggestions from resident Nick Warranoff that the city postpone the Downtown Precise Plan (DPP), the newly reorganized Orinda City Council pushed ahead with the project, which they plan to adopt at the same time as the Housing Element and the updated Safety Element on Jan. 31. The city heard a presentation from Eli Krispi of city consultant Placeworks on the safety element.

The portion of the presentation on the DPP was conducted by Planning Director Drummond Buckley and Assistant Planner Darin Hughes. Buckley explained that the DPP will be the one place to go for Orinda's vision of the downtown and that it will guide future decisions regarding downtown based on that vision and the guiding principals enumerated in the plan. "Many people would like to see change in downtown Orinda," Buckley said, "and if people come in with proposed projects that could create change. It could be new developments or redevelopment of existing buildings, but the DPP will provide a pathway for change and help us ensure that the work is well done."

The DPP contains five chapters, one of which deals with San Pablo Creek. This section was opposed by the Friends of Orinda Creeks because they believed that the DPP recommended only the city's plan for the creek based on some information that the Friends allege is incorrect.

The basic disagreement between the city and the Friends was over the path of the creek. The Friends' plan called for a "meander," which would reestablish a curving section of the creek that was straightened when the creek was confined to a cement channel decades ago.

Buckley explained that the city did not have any money to purchase land from private property owners to accommodate a meander, nor could the city use eminent domain to acquire property. According to the Friends, the city consultant had said that a meander would require the removal of 60 to 80 parking spaces from parking lots along the creek, while the Friends maintain that their plan only ever talked about the removal of 10 parking spaces. The Friends also disputed the consultants' claim that the meander would undermine Camino Pablo, because the planned meander would be to the east, away from the road.

Buckley noted, "We owe that of gratitude to the Friends for starting that conversation, and for supporting the creek." But he added, after "all these years - and it hurts a little bit, to be honest - that there's this negativity" when the essence of the dispute, is really only how big the project should be. Both sides think that they are being realistic, and that, he concluded, is where they disagree. Michael Bowen of the Friends responded, "I think that as long as we're going to talk about our feelings, that we feel hurt, too, and we don't quite understand why these two concepts can't be."

New council member Brandyn Iverson, who served on the Planning Commission before being elected to the city council, suggested that the DPP should allow for the possibility of either plan, and Buckley agreed that that was a possibility and he had no objection. After Mayor Inga Miller was reassured that making that change would present no impediment to future development along the creek, the council agreed to ask staff to modify the language of the DPP to indicate that there were two possible plans for creek restoration.

Another commenter was Kevin Burke of East Bay for Everyone. "I don't think the Housing Element will be certified," he said. "The Gateway site is really bad. I think you should listen to the community and start building housing at BART." He also questioned why the St. Stephen's church site was removed from the Housing Element. Buckley pointed out that the housing element was not on the agenda, but explained that the California Department of Housing and Community (HCD) understood that BART would not be ready to proceed with plans for housing on their site in Orinda until the next housing cycle. Miller explained that the St. Stephen's site was removed because the church said that they would not proceed with housing on the site.

The DPP evolved from a long journey to improve Orinda's downtown. After more than 30 years of hoping for change in the downtown, the city council in 2016 enlisted the help of the Urban Land Institute and Mainstreet America to research possible downtown development and make suggestions. As things evolved, the city council decided to hire a consultant to craft a downtown plan, but were unable to find a suitable firm. It was decided that the city would produce the DPP in-house.

Over the past years, city staff and their consultants, Placeworks, have conducted research, have reached out to residents and stakeholders of Orinda, have held open meetings and workshops to discover what was wanted for downtown Orinda and how redevelopment could best be achieved. Into the mix were thrown the sixth cycle housing element and numerous pieces of state legislation aimed at forcing cities to provide for more housing. In some cases, the legislation overrides city control, which caused the city to want to adopt objective design guidelines that would apply even without discretionary approval of projects.

Objective Design Standards are envisioned by the DPP, but will not become regulations until adopted in conjunction with amendments to the Orinda General Plan and the municipal code. If and when adopted, the ODS would govern residential uses in two new downtown zones, Downtown Core and Downtown General zones with densities set to 25, 30, or 55 units per acre and building heights of 35 to 45 feet. There would also be a sub-zone of Downtown General-Enhanced, which would allow for the possibility of 100% housing without retail uses.

The DPP, the Safety Element, and the Housing Element are on the agenda to be adopted by the Council at a special meeting on Jan. 31.

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