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Planning Commission recommends the Housing and Safety Elements, Downtown Precise Plan

By Sora O'Doherty

As the long process of adopting a 6th Cycle Housing Element, a revised Safety Element, and a Downtown Precise Plan (DPP) comes to an end, the Orinda Planning Commission on Jan. 18 recommended that the City Council adopt the Final Environmental Impact Report for Plan Orinda at its Jan. 31 meeting. Although that meeting occurred after press time, it was anticipated that the council would meet the Jan. 31 deadline for approving the housing element and the safety element.

As the city has wended its way through this process, it was decided to combine these required elements with a DPP. The Plan is intended to provide guidelines for all building projects in the downtown area, as well as to put in place objective design standards that would apply even to new developments under recent and anticipated legislation that would remove design discretion from the city in favor of non-discretionary approvals aimed at increasing housing throughout the state of California.

Retired attorney Nick Warranoff, who frequently speaks at public meetings, suggested that it was unnecessary to adopt the DPP, and expressed fears that it would lead to very high buildings in a very densely populated downtown Orinda. Although the Planning Commission did acknowledge the potential effects of density bonuses, Commissioner Robert Hubner pointed out that the decision to adopt the DPP was a "difficult but necessary" decision. He praised Orinda staff and their consultants for their hard work. Vice Chair Willy Mautner agreed that the team had put together a "very thorough and comprehensive document." He added that he thought that a lot of hard work had gone into the project and should be recognized. Chair Ann Parnigoni, and Commissioner Marian Jelinek also voted in favor of recommending the plan.

Commissioner Lina Lee had an excused absence. Planning Director Drummond Buckley agreed that he was very proud of his team, especially Winnie Mui and Darin Hughes and the Placeworks consultants.

One significant change that was incorporated in the final draft DPP was the inclusion of two plans for the restoration of San Pablo Creek in downtown Orinda. One plan was put forward by the Friends of Orinda Creeks in 2019 and another plan proposed by Placeworks in 2022. The primary difference between the two plans is the the Friends of Orinda Creeks plan proposes a meander and the Placeworks plan is for a straight channel.

Two major concerns expressed by commenters were the suitability of two locations: the Caltrans site known as Gateway, which is off Highway 24 beside the Cal Shakes property; and the BART parking lots. Buckley explained that the Gateway site is particularly suited for residential development because it is situated directly opposite a newly approved congregate care facility on Wilder Road; it is one of the viable large vacant plots of land available in Orinda; and it is located in a high resource area close to a major recreational facility, a performing arts venue, public trails and open spaces as well as Orinda's newest neighborhood. In addition, he said that with improved pedestrian and bicycle connections and/or shuttle or transport links, it is close and accessible to downtown Orinda and BART.

As for the possibility of providing for housing on the site of the BART parking lots, it was pointed out once again that complex ownership issues mean that the site is better suited for the 7th Cycle Housing Element. Other changes to the housing and safety elements resulted from ongoing dialog with the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). These changes included adding additional milestones to ensure progress on the Caltrans site, the addition of new action to state how the city will facilitate development on small lots, increasing the bed limits for emergency shelters from 7 to 20, and adding new action to monitor development fees to ensure that they are not a constraint to development of multifamily housing. Some key changes to the DPP sites analysis included adding five additional DPP sites. The original selection of 43 sites had been reduced to 21 sites based on owner interest and redevelopment potential, but now with the five additional sites totals 26 DPP sites. The final draft also includes 55 dwelling units per acre in the County Club Plaza Block and at Country Club Plaza and the BevMo block. The height limit on a number of DPP sites, which the city had proposed to lower, has been kept at 45 feet in response to HCD comments.

All of the revised documents can be viewed at <https://www.planorinda.com>

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