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Orinda Planning Director Drummond Buckley retires

By Sora O'Doherty



Drummond Buckley Photo Sora O'Doherty

Drummond Buckley, who has worked in the Orinda Planning Department for many years, is leaving. He is winding up his career in Orinda at the same time as one of his biggest projects, the Wilder development, is also wrapping up after decades in development. After a difficult history, Wilder now boasts 245 home sites, almost all of which have completed homes, as well as five community ball fields, a community park, an Art and Garden Center for use by the public, a network of walking, bicycle, and equestrian trails, and over 1,300 acres of open space. In addition there is a public clubhouse and a private swimming and fitness facility.

After obtaining a master's degree in urban planning from UCLA, Buckley began his career working for the city of Santa Monica. In 1995 he took a job with Bay Area Environmental Consulting, but found that he missed working in the public sector. He came to Orinda as an associate senior planner with a deal that allowed him to work only on Wilder.

Wilder at that time was a cattle ranch, and the farmer who leased the land was named Hank. Hank Hill in Wilder is named after him, which was one of Buckley's contributions. The other was the inspiration for the name, Wilder. At a brainstorming session, Buckley said

the word he associated with the valley was wilderness, which morphed into Wilder as the name of the new development.

Buckley remembers the scale of the project as monumental, as the valley was re-engineered and millions of cubic yards of earth were moved. Just the grading of the valley was a multi-year project. In fact, Buckley remembers that the television show, *Dirty Jobs*, did an episode on Wilder and its clay soil.

But in 2006-07, the sales office at Wilder couldn't sell any lots. With the great recession of 2008, the Wilder project was shut down and the whole team was unemployed for six months. Buckley was actually out of a job for over a year, and finally accepted work in Afghanistan as a military base planner.

The dangerous work paid well. An attack on the base where he was working killed six or seven people and injured 20 people who were sitting in the dining room when an explosion blew off the wall near the place Buckley usually sat. On that occasion, he would have been there, but for the fact that he was waiting for others. "That really impacted me," he said. "Any decision could be fatal."

After that, Buckley took work with the city of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. He enjoyed his time there, not caged on a military base and able to drive wherever he wanted. He worked on a big shopping center.

However, a contact from Wilder let him know that Orinda was looking for a planning director, and in 2016 he returned to the United States to fill the position.

Buckley's knowledge of the history of Wilder is encyclopedic. The first development agreement in 1990 featured a golf course and conference center, but the DA was completely redone, eliminating the golf course and conference center. Buckley recalls that the city councils that have dealt with Wilder were very sophisticated, and that the DA allowed a public entity, the city of Orinda, to negotiate with a developer.

The city's vision wasn't always popular, however, and at one point there was a local initiative because Orinda residents disagreed with decisions by the city council on Wilder. In 2005 the first amendment to the DA completely rewrote the agreement.

According to Buckley, the city received many benefits from the development at Wilder, including a swap deal that provided the land for the Orinda library and land for affordable housing, \$10,000 towards low income housing, the Wilder play fields, and the Art & Garden Center. Wilder owners pay a community facilities tax, with money going to fund the Orinda Police Department.

Last year Buckley and his team submitted a successful 6th Housing Element (HE) to the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). The Housing Element combined many of the factors that the city has been long considering in terms of downtown development and the Downtown

Precise Plan. Buckley discussed why the Caltrans site, which the HE had relied on, was rejected by HCD.

Caltrans, Buckley says, is notorious for not decertifying surplus land, like the site alongside Highway 24 that has been vacant for 50 years. The site had originally been intended for an interchange from Highway 24 to a new highway to Moraga. Although the plan for that highway was abandoned, the land has remained unused. Now, Buckley added, there are concerns about contamination and Caltrans will not decertify the land until it is cleaned up by the city, which does not have the requisite \$10,000 for the cleanup.

Buckley plans to divide his time between Washington state and Bogota, Colombia. He looks forward to focusing on his photography hobby and taking some university level courses. He would have left sooner, but admits that City Manager David Biggs persuaded him to stay longer. As it happens, Biggs himself has announced that he will not be renewing his existing employment agreement with Orinda, which ends June 30. Biggs told the council that his decision is based on family needs and plans to relocate to Southern California.

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