Orinda School Board asks legislature for grant to preserve and protect nature area

By Sora O'Doherty

The Orinda Union School District board of trustees voted at its April 19 special meeting to ask Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan to seek funding from the governor's office to be allocated from the state's 2022-23 budget for the express purpose of preserving and protecting the Wagner Ranch Nature Area. The matter was brought to the board by OUSD Superintendent Aida Glimme. The exact amount to be asked for has yet to be determined, but would be in the region of $5 million or more.

The Wagner Ranch Nature Area, as it is currently known, covers an area of approximately 19 acres adjacent to Wagner Ranch Elementary School, but it is considered to be a sixth OUSD campus, where students from all of the other elementary schools in the district receive outdoor education. Fully owned by OUSD, the area features meadows, forest, ponds and streams and is a is certified as a Schoolyard Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. The area is bordered on one side by the San Pablo Creek, home to thousands of native plants and animals.

Throughout the year, OUSD students take part in field trips and hands-on experiential educational opportunities in the nature area, including summer camps. The district is looking toward expanding opportunities to avail of the nature area to middle school students and to students from other districts.

District staff was informed of the opportunity to submit a request for funding and protection of the nature area. State funds may only be used for such projects, and may not be used to improve school facilities, to secure services for students, (such as mental health support), or for staff salaries.

The proposed request would be to protect an area of roughly 15 acres and to designate that area as open space. In exchange for the funds, the designated portion of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area would be permanently preserved as protected, deed-restricted open space lands and would not be subject to potential future construction or development by OUSD or others.

At Housing Element review, city council agrees to not recommend housing at St. Stephen's

By Sora O'Doherty

The Orinda City Council heard a detailed review of the draft Housing Element for the sixth cycle, and, in response to numerous public comments, agreed to not recommend housing be built on the site of the St. Stephen's church parking lot. Although the church had been willing to consider 30 housing units on its property, local residents in the area strongly objected. In response to public opinion, the church made it clear that it would not proceed with building housing on its parking lot. The city received over 100 emails on the proposed draft, one of which was signed by hundreds of local residents. Ted Urban wrote to urge the city to include the site on the grounds that it has relatively easy access to Highway 24 and is located next to a fire station.

The discussion of the draft included a presentation by Placeworks consultants Jennifer Gastelum and Cynthia Walsh. Orinda Planning Director Drummond Buckley and City Manager David Biggs were also available for questions. The Housing Element is an extremely complex process, dictated by state law, and the discussion continued over hours.

Placeworks went through the existing fifth cycle Housing Element, under which Orinda was only obligated to provide for the addition of 227 housing units and succeeded in having 346 building permits issued. However, none of those permits were for very-low or low-income units. The fifth Housing Element covered the period from 2015 to 2023. The sixth cycle covers the period of 2023 to 2031.

For the sixth Housing Element, Orinda has received a regional housing needs assessment (RHNA) number of 1,359, a more than 500% increase. Adding a 25% buffer, the number of housing units Orinda is required to provide for is 1,506, and Placeworks has succeeded in identifying 1,806 potential sites, of which 982 are designated for very-low to low-income housing. The city is not required to actually build any housing units, but must make reasonable provisions to allow such units to be built.

One of the issues that attracted a great deal of public interest and comment is the possibility of rezoning the BART parking lots for housing, which could, theoretically, provide enough housing to meet Orinda's RHNA for the sixth cycle. This approach was promoted by local resident Nick Waranoff and supported by other commenters. The problem with this approach, identified by Placeworks, is that the BART parking lot may not realistically be available for home building in a timeframe within the sixth cycle that will be acceptable to the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD).