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Letters to the editor

A Better Rezoning Plan for Orinda

The recent mailing of notices to some Orinda residents, advising of the first phase of proposed rezoning consistent with its adopted Housing Element, has renewed interest in how can Orinda best comply with the state mandate that the city rezone to allow 1,359 new housing units. The first phase of the current rezoning plan, presented to the Planning Commission and a large audience of concerned residents on Dec. 12, 2023, calls for adding 286 housing units at the three churches south of downtown, and at Miramonte High School. Additional rezoning, not yet announced, would allow an additional 421 to 1,618 units to be added downtown. Concerns expressed at the meeting, and online, concerned traffic, schools, and emergency response and evacuation.

Preliminary important note: that fact that the city designates a site as for "affordable housing" is not binding on the owner or developer; they are free to decide whether to reduce rents/prices and restrict tenants/buyers for some or all of the units to "affordable" levels.

Here is a better plan: (1) Miramonte High School: no housing. (2) Churches south of downtown: Take into account new SB 4, that provides that, notwithstanding current single family zoning, affordable housing can be built at churches as a matter of right, regardless of zoning, at a density of 20 units/acre. Given this reality, a density of 20 units/acre might as well be included in the state-mandate Housing Element and zoning.

(3) Downtown: add at most 240 units per the recommendation of the 2017 report Orinda received from the Urban Law Institute's Technical Assistance Panel. Adding more housing than that downtown will jam traffic on Moraga Way and on Camino Pablo, both of which lead only to downtown, and will, as the EIR found, have a "significant" adverse impact on emergency response and evacuation.

(4) CalTrans parcel near CalShakes and across Highway 24 from Wilder: add the balance of the required housing excluding market rate (approx 700 units) here, in a high density, mixed income (50% affordable), mixed use small village development, based on N. Berkeley BART plans (buildings three to eight stories with parking and open space), plus a shuttle to downtown and BART, and amenities such as a casual restaurant or brew pub, convenience store. Although HCD rejected the city's plan for the CalTrans parcel, the most likely reason was that the city proposed only a low income isolated project without amenities, which housing advocacy groups opposed. HCD didn't totally reject use of the CalTrans parcel, as some believe. In fact, to the contrary, HCD directed the city "to rezone the CalTrans Gateway site and decertify the site to allow for affordable housing development by January 2026." Focusing on the CalTrans parcel would reduce the impact on schools south of Orinda, and the increased school population on the north side could be at least partially absorbed if the School District exercises its option to build a new elementary school at Wilder. Doing so would also minimize the adverse impacts on traffic, and on emergency response and evacuation.

My plan would balance the requirements of the state mandate with a goal of minimizing adverse impacts on traffic, schools, and emergency response and evacuation.

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Orinda Bans Public Comments on Zoom

Thank you Lamorinda Weekly for reporting on the public participation travesty occurring in Orinda ("Orinda U-turn", Dec. 20). "Reacting" to an imagined inundation of hate speech by communists, Islamic terrorists, and Hells Angels, Orinda's City Manager banned public comment via Zoom from public meetings. And after two sessions of discussions, the City Council endorsed the prohibition.

For two and a half years, all City meetings were conducted on Zoom with no incidence of hate speech. In March, in-person meetings resumed but the City Manager "advised" the Council that it would be too difficult or expensive to provide Zoom access to any meeting other than Council and Planning Commission meetings. (An internet search of Zoom Rooms and technology like Meeting Owl suggests otherwise.)

Did this disuse of technology have any impact on public participation? Prior to the shutting down of Zoom, the SSTOC (which is the watchdog managing \$4 million a year of Measure R sales tax revenue) conducted 23 monthly meetings on Zoom with 70 comments from 13 residents. In the ten months since Zoom was ended, one resident attended and commented at one meeting. Mission accomplished. Keep those pesky citizens away.

What is the City manager afraid of? That residents might voice objections to his policies? Like spending almost 90% of essential service funding, including Measure R's \$4 million, on roads and storm drains while spending less than 10% on wildfire fuel mitigation, which Measure R was supposed to address? Or that after three years the City's wildfire prevention "plan" still has no way to measure the impact of measures taken because the City Manager told the Council that the City has "other" priorities?

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[back](#)

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