

Published April 19th, 2017

Orindans eager to hear Urban Land Institute's initial thoughts on city's downtown development plans

By Sora O'Doherty



Opening the Orinda Community Park to the street was one idea of the TAP. Photo Andy Scheck

An overflow crowd of about 150 came to hear a presentation on downtown development by the Urban Land Institute's Technical Assistance Panel to a joint meeting of Orinda's city council and planning commission.

At the end of two days of interviewing interested citizens, the TAP group - made up of eight professionals who volunteered their time to the Orinda project - already had a 63-page presentation chock full of information and ideas. While some ideas, such as downtown housing, continue to be controversial, many other suggestions, such as opening Orinda Community Park to the street, received apparent widespread approval. The presentation, which was limited to one hour, sparked a vigorous exchange of ideas on the future of downtown.

The TAP was given four tasks:

1. Based on the TAP interviews, what

is the collective vision for downtown Orinda? Provide a draft a mission statement for downtown.

2. Based on the community's vision for downtown Orinda, what streetscape design concepts, if any, are recommended?

3. Based on the community's vision for downtown Orinda, what are the restoration and planning recommendations, if any, for San Pablo Creek?

4. Based on the community's vision for downtown Orinda, what changes, if any, are recommended to downtown development standards and allowable land uses?

The TAP found that Orinda possesses an impressive civic realm, consisting of the library, community center, and community park. They were enamored of the creek, and saw it as a surmountable challenge. They understood Orinda's tricky relationship with BART. Most cities would love to have a BART station right in town, said the TAP Chair, David Cropper, director of development for TMG, but acknowledged that it created parking problems for Orinda.

The TAP found Orinda teens to be outstanding in their engagement, and made suggestions for methods to keep teens connected. Jessica von Borck, assistant city manager in Fremont, suggested making Orinda Way a "living street" to enhance the pedestrian experience. A living street is a street primarily designed for pedestrians and cyclists and a social space where people can meet and children can play safely and legally and where vehicular access is secondary or even closed for pedestrian use.

The idea of focusing on San Pablo Creek remains popular, but ULI's suggestion that funding could come from developers of 240 units of housing downtown was met with conflicting views. While some expressed a desire for smaller living units downtown for residents wishing to downsize or perhaps for adult children wanted to come back to Orinda and get started in the housing market, others were opposed to the idea.

One of the ideas that seemed to be met favorably was arranging a direct entrance to Theatre Square from BART near the Fourth Bore restaurant. The TAP also suggested turning Bryant Street into a parking area, but residents pointed out that the area is used for casual carpooling. Although parking was not within the TAP's scope, they recognized it as a problem, and mentioned the possibility of providing parking for employees.

Speakers in the public forum included representatives of What's Up Downtown Orinda, Orinda Vision, Orinda Watch, the Chamber of Commerce, and many individual Orinda residents.

Marty De Laveaga Stewart?, an ancestor of the De Laveaga family who were formative in the development of Orinda, urged the city to go ahead with development, noting that downtown hasn't changed since the 1950s.

Andrew Van Wye favored the development of new housing units, opining that "housing delayed is housing denied."

Michael Kaplin also expressed interest in housing on Orinda Village, noting that some residents may want to downsize and their big houses, once sold, would increase the city's tax revenue.

Several speakers focused on the question, who is downtown development supposed to serve? Hillary Murphy, representing What's Up Downtown Orinda, liked that there were a lot of ideas that could be implemented in the short term, an opinion echoed by Mayor Eve Phillips.

For more information

The following links provide access to information on Orinda downtown development. The TAP's members and mission, notes of their interviews, and their findings and suggestions can be found in their slides; residents can watch the video of the entire joint meeting of the city council and the Planning Commission online, and also access the briefing book prepared for the TAP by Orinda city staff.

ULI Slides:

<https://cityoforinda.app.box.com/s/xk9gps5hxtizlp7pl8wcp4yyf2qhnq5>

Video of ULI Presentation to Joint City Council/Planning Commission:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1REIMHXsO3a-rGRZHOTQUdpOOP1fusv4tR7i7wjFqknU/edit>

Briefing Book prepared by Orinda Planning Department for ULI:

<http://orindaca.iqm2.com/Citizens/SplitView.aspx?Mode=Video&MeetingID=1049&MinutesID=1231&Format=Minutes&MediaFileFormat=ismv>

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA