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Main Street America promotes a healthy vision for Orinda

By Sora O'Doherty

When Main Street America offered its final report to the Orinda city council, there were some surprises. While the study found that Orindans tend to be older and richer than residents of other places and that Orinda's retail leakage is more of a hemorrhage than a dribble, the report suggests some novel approaches to development, such as making Orinda a health and fitness mecca.

Another surprise was that, after interviewing many residents from many different groups, The National Main Street Center concluded that, in general, most groups interviewed are in favor of multi-family residential housing as a "value add" to downtown, but concern remains around levels of density, building scale, impacts on parking, and whether community infrastructure could support additional residential growth.

The final report was presented to the city council by Matthew Wagner, Ph.D., Vice President of Revitalization Programs. Wagner emphasized that the process of downtown revitalization could be slow and incremental but still eventually successful. He did recommend that Orinda formalize a city-managed effort using city staff. The complete report can be read at

<https://cityoforinda.box.com/s/ywaz9rr041e37d0ct7dkykotsbeduxax>.

NMSC specifically focused on the market and how to competitively position downtown Orinda from a consumer and business mix perspective but their work in other respects aligned well with the study conducted by the Urban Land Institute (ULI). The NMSC also agreed with ULI's suggested downtown mission statement: "Orinda strives to provide excellent service in a fiscally responsible manner and to promote a safe, healthy and vibrant community."

After considering the strengths, weaknesses and threats to Orinda's downtown, NMSC recommended that the city strive to encourage health and wellness businesses, such as medical offices, alternative therapies, pharmacies and natural food and remedy purveyors, as well as sporting good/bicycle stores, gyms, and perhaps a hospital or urgent care facility. Also included in this would be healthy restaurants, and studios for yoga, martial arts or dance.

Such businesses can be encouraged, NMSC concluded, by a variety of activities, such as adding bike paths and bike racks in the commercial district, installing a way-finding system from outdoor attractions to downtown, signs and markers to create walking and running trails in and around the commercial district, or installing exercise equipment in a pocket park. NMSC also recommended activities such as meeting with the business owners and the managers of parks or recreational sites so they can understand and further hone the strategy to enhance sports and recreation attractions.

Another suggestion is that Orinda develop an event downtown that connects to regional recreational attractions, and gave as an example Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where they hold a winter carnival where some ski sports that normally take place on the mountains are brought downtown - including "ski joring," where a skier is pulled by a horse. Orinda could develop a brand identity that connects health and wellness to the district by, for example, holding a health fair, with healthy cooking demonstrations, physical activities, and opportunities to get screened for blood pressure and other health indicators. Working with restaurants to offer healthy options on their menus and help them to distribute the menus through other businesses that are part of the Health and Wellness cluster was also recommended, as was working with a local gym to run outdoor "boot camps" during warmer weather months.

NMSC also looked at the possibility of encouraging entrepreneurial businesses, including shared office spaces, drop-in spaces and supporting spaces such as cafes and bars or a brewery. Business might also be encouraged by offering conveniences, such as groceries, restaurants, office supplies, daycare, dry cleaners, postal/pack-and-ship services, accounting and tax services, banking services, gas stations and hair care. The report contains many alternative avenues upon which Orinda might achieve downtown development, listing the pros and cons of each. The following next steps are offered: adopt transformation strategies as market framework for downtown, examine and align on near term organizational structure focused on implementation of strategies, take a new group to visit California Main Street programs, or offer stakeholders Main Street 101 webinars. Orinda could also adopt a one year economic vitality workplan.

Paul Ugenti, owner of 25A Orinda Way, suggested that Orinda might be a center for venture capitalists in the East Bay. Ugenti expressed great enthusiasm for downtown development and urged the city council to involve the new business owners in the process. He himself volunteered for just about anything the council might ask of him. Aaran Schultz suggested that visuals are very important to people in Orinda, and Kathleen Jenkins said that housing is not Orinda's problem, but that downtown development should concentrate on serving the people who already live in the city.

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