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Downtown Development Subcommittee gets ready for action on Streetscape Master Plan

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda residents have a lot of ideas about how the upcoming Streetscape Master Plan should be researched - so much so that the Downtown Development Subcommittee of the city council vowed to hold its next meeting in a bigger room. Associate Planner Adam Foster, Planning Director Drummond Buckley, and Victoria Eisen of Eisen Letunic, the firm contracted to complete the Streetscape Master Plan, joined subcommittee members Vice Mayor Inga Miller and Council Member Eve Phillips for the meeting.

The first subject for discussion was the planned interviews with stakeholder groups. Planning has a list of 15 groups, updated from the previous interviews with the Urban Land Institute on downtown development.

What is envisioned is a five-hour "speed-dating" session, in which 15-minute interviews will be held with each stakeholder group, with a five-minute break between each group. Before the interviews, each group will be asked to respond to a questionnaire, so that interviews can be very specific.

Timing was an issue, and after some discussion, it was decided that it would be best to hold all the interviews the same day, but start in the afternoon so that the process will run over into the evening to accommodate any groups that might be unable to appear during the day. Eisen fielded questions: Do you have to be there? "No, there will be other public events and lots of other ways to chime in," she said. In addition to the big public events, Eisen said, the firm will be at the farmers' market, the food truck night, and other smaller events to engage with the public. Right now, Eisen added, the firm is reviewing older documents and creating bulleted lists in preparation for its briefing book that will offer maps, charts and narrative about downtown Orinda. Eartha Newsong and Kay Jenkins were concerned about how Eisen Letunic would get the input of seniors and disabled persons. Newsong suggested that Eisen contact Seniors Around Town for how best to gather input from seniors, some of whom may be housebound. There are also about six city commissions and committees whose input will be sought. The Parks and Recreation Commission scheduled a meeting regarding the plan on Aug. 8 and the matter must come before the planning commission as well. CZ Turner, chair of the Parks and Recreation Commission, said that some of the things under discussion are already being done by his commission. Buckley and Foster will attend those meetings. Ted Urban, a member of the Art in Public Places committee, summarized the four steps for the Streetscape Plan: 1) get input from the public; 2) go to meetings of the committees and commissions to get their input; 3) the matter appears before the planning commission; and 4) the matter returns to the city council for action.

Urban raised another issue: the scope of the project. He wondered why zoning and land use were not included. Phillips explained that one of the things that came out of the ULI study was the idea that 30 years of trying to do something big hadn't worked, so the approach should be to do smaller things that might actually work, which can help to establish trust in the process.

Orinda Chamber of Commerce president Roy Hodgkinson said the chamber is receiving questions about the project, such as, why is this project a priority? And why is it being done now? He urged public relations and marketing, along with civic engagement, to reach an agreed upon five-year plan.

Miller explained that the city has received a grant for this project that needs to be used in a timely manner and Tom D'Amato agreed with the approach of trying to get something done, even if everything can't be accomplished.

He urged, "Don't let perfect paralyze us."

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