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After ConnectOrinda Celebration, city council favors near-term projects

By Sora O'Doherty



Animated discussions about plans for ConnectOrinda were common at May 28 event. Photo Sora O'Doherty

A plan to show off one of the near-term projects for downtown Orinda, the use of Vashell Way as a pedestrian area got washed out by wet weather, but was rescheduled and held inside on May 28. At the event, called the

ConnectOrinda Celebration, the public was given another opportunity to discuss and comment on the projects that might be part of the final Orinda Streetscape Master Plan. Although not as well attended as some previous events, there was a good turnout and members of the public engaged in animated conversations with staff and city council members. The results of this and the preceding events were then brought back to the city council on June 4 so that the council could provide guidance for the preparation of the draft Downtown Streetscape Master Plan to be brought back to the council in September.

The boards from the Celebration will continue to be up in the Community Center until July 4 for public viewing, according to Senior Planner Adam Foster. The project has the major goal of identifying projects with broad community support. Its main objectives are to connect the two sides of downtown for all users, support future pedestrian access along San Pablo Creek, preserve Orinda's unique sense of place, produce grant-eligible projects that can be funded, beautify downtown Orinda and build consensus for the final plan through robust community engagement.

One of the most popular projects from the beginning has been to improve access to San Pablo Creek. Among the most contentious were the large-scale projects of improving circulation between the two halves of downtown Orinda, the Theatre District and the Village. The council was unanimous in its belief that the large-scale projects should be deferred until a large traffic corridor study could be funded and conducted. Speakers appeared to be divided about the usefulness of the existing pedestrian access from the Village to BART for bicyclists.

Jaime Peterson said that he is a bike commuter, as is his wife, and that he regularly rides from home to BART. However, he said he never used the pedestrian bridge for bike commuting, nor did any of the cyclists he knows. "It's not a viable option," he said. Tandra Ericksen said that she favors the combined pedestrian/bicycle access, but mentioned that she believed that the current bridge does not meet the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Erickson also favors proposed parklets and would like more places in downtown to sit and enjoy Orinda's fine weather. On the other hand, Katherin Bernstein voiced support for the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists, but thought the cost is outrageous and asked for alternatives. She and her husband took the overpass which needs to be painted and shrubbery cut back and she did not see any problems with bicyclists and pedestrians using it. Kathleen Jenkins, citing statistics on the national rise in pedestrian and bicyclist deaths, suggested moving bicycles off Camino Pablo entirely. The council generally agreed that the existing bridge could be improved, perhaps raising the section currently at ground level up to the height of the elevated portion, and with other improvements to make the bridge more attractive.

Another project liked by the council is the construction of a living landscape berm in the Theatre District to provide visual and sound separation from Highway 24. Staff noted that several long-term projects had been eliminated as financially infeasible, including an aerial gondola, tunneling behind the existing support structures for the highway, or widening the overpass supports, all of which would definitely require a corridor study. While Mayor Inga Miller agreed, she also pointed out that the city really needs to be looking at a complete fix, down the road, far out in the future. However, they need to be looking at how to maintain pedestrian safety and enhance bicycle safety in the meantime.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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