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Orinda takes next step toward downtown development - RFP for Downtown Precise Plan

By Sora O'Doherty

Development of downtown Orinda has been on the front burner for some time now, with the focus being on the Streetscape Master Plan as developed by ConnectOrinda. While that project focuses only on public property, the city is now moving forward with a downtown precise plan that will address planning issues for private property. Together, the two plans will represent a comprehensive plan for downtown Orinda, according to the staff presentation by Drummond Buckley, director of planning and Adam Foster, senior planner.

The council had asked staff to come back to them to explain the difference between a downtown specific plan and a downtown precise plan. On Aug. 20, staff reported that they were willing to work on either, but preferred a precise plan because there are minimum components for a specific plan while a precise plan is not defined by state law, and is, therefore, more flexible. The council agreed, and gave staff directions to draft a request for proposals.

The specific tasks for which consultant assistance is sought includes: community engagement as the city would like to hear from as many community members as possible, and build on momentum from ConnectOrinda and creation of the precise downtown plan. The city hopes to build consensus around a vision for downtown.

Research indicates that a programmatic environmental impact report, rather than a project EIR, would be required. A programmatic EIR would contain enough detail so that it could be relied upon for most development required under the plan. New and amended downtown policies and objectives may require revision of the city's general plan. The development of amended standards will include topics such as residential density, building heights, and setback requirements.

The precise plan should also include objective design criteria, standards that involve no personal or subjective judgement. Such criteria are increasingly being required by the state. In addition, the city is seeking criteria for mixed use and apartments, for example, orientation of buildings that face San Pablo Creek, facade articulation, and streetscape relationship including renderings and sketches.

The RFP will include specific tasks to embrace the creek, further restoration, and support public access. The city is looking for new goals and objectives for the creek and how development relates to it. In addition, the precise plan should include development incentives for projects that embrace the creek and further the goal of restoration. Potentially the plan may include a San Pablo Creek Overlay Zone for some parcels, establish objective design standards for creekside areas and support a future creekside trail and public access to the creek.

Interest in the development of San Pablo Creek has been one of the driving forces behind the urge to develop downtown Orinda. At the close of the Aug. 20 city council meeting Council Member Nick Kosla gave a report of his two-hour meeting with the city and the Friends of Orinda Creeks, who are working with consultant, FlowWest. One alternative treatment of the creek was discussed. The Friends of Orinda Creeks are excited about how the creeks can be incorporated into the precise plan, Kosla said. He said that he found it to be a productive meeting, and he thinks there will be another one in September or October.

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