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Planning Task Force Presents Recommendations

By Andrea A. Firth

Orinda's City Council and Planning Commission held a joint meeting on February 3rd to hear and discuss the recommendations of the Planning Process Review Task Force. About 30 interested residents were in attendance as the Task Force's three subcommittees outlined their suggestions to streamline planning in three areas: process, residential, and downtown development. Council members Amy Worth and Tom McCormick have facilitated the generation of the Task Force's 51 recommendations, which are the result of hundreds of meetings over the course of a full calendar year including several public workshops and are compiled in an inch-thick report.

The goal of the Process Subcommittee was to streamline the planning and review process to address residents' feedback that it is confusing and takes too long. Ninety percent of applications to the Planning Department are for single-family residences. To make the process easier for the applicants to understand and manage, the Task Force created a 15-page, color-coded guide complete with definitions, flowcharts, recommended steps, and estimated timing.

One of the most interesting changes presented regarding residential development was the proposal for a Neighbor Opt-In process. For some modifications, if the applicant can obtain the consent of the surrounding neighbors, he can bypass the need for a Planning Commission hearing. The Residential Subcommittee also proposed modifications to planning rules related to setbacks, the floor area ratio (FAR) [used to achieve a balance of the size of the house to the parcel], structure height on sloped properties, and tree management.

Clark Wallace and Bruce Burrows presented the recommendations of the Downtown Subcommittee. The core element of the downtown plan was the infusion of housing to bring in more shoppers and create a pedestrian-oriented atmosphere for seniors and others. The subcommittee did not suggest expanding the perimeter of the downtown areas outward but has proposed moving upward by 20 feet to allow building heights to reach 55 feet, about four stories, in limited areas. Wallace noted that the PG&E towers in the Village present an obstacle to taller buildings but that the relocation of the towers required further study and was the work of another task force. Resident Ann O'Connell-Nye questioned the Task Force's plans for the Orinda Theater expressing her concern that the Theater be kept intact. "The Task Force is totally committed to the movie theater. We want that theater to be there forever," responded Burrows.

Bill Judge, a former Planning Commission Member and Orinda Mayor, complimented the Task Force on their work. "What's been put forward is a great effort." However, he cautioned that the Task Force's expert members do not necessarily represent the community, and he encouraged the Task Force to hold additional public workshops.

Judge was also concerned about the proposal to change the floor area ratio guideline for residential development. "In my view the FAR has worked well.

Please don't start mucking around with it," stated Judge. He felt the proposed Neighbor Consent Process took the responsibility for some residential development decisions away from the Planning Commission, which he felt might not serve the interests of the larger community. Although he felt adjusting the height allowance of downtown buildings upward might be acceptable in a large development, Judge questioned the prudence of this change.

Joyce Hawkins, another former Orinda Mayor, mirrored some of Judge's sentiments with her comments. "I think the Task Force did a great job. It's time that revisions be made," said Hawkins. But she also stated that the floor area ratio guideline had worked well for Orinda, and she worried that a change would negatively impact the diversity of housing available. Hawkins felt some of the proposed changes to the retail frontage requirements in downtown spaces were contrary to the goal of revitalization. She was also very concerned about the impact of the increase in building height to 55 feet. "I encourage you to look at the visual effect of buildings of this size. The imposing face of a 55-foot building on Orinda Way differs as compared to a similar building on the wider Mount Diablo Boulevard," she added.

The City Council and Planning Commission will hold another meeting to discuss the Planning Process Review Task Force recommendations on February 24th at 5 p. m. in the Garden Room of the Library.

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