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## Planning Commission Gets an Earful on Downtown Revitalization

By Andrea A. Firth

Amazing, amazing. It's wonderful to see you all here," stated Orinda Planning Commission Chair Dean Orr as he looked out on the Library Auditorium packed to overflowing with residents who had come to the Commission's meeting on April 27th. On the Planning Commission's agenda for the evening was a review of the recommendations from the Planning Process Review Task Force for the revitalization of downtown Orinda; the hot topic was the recommendation to allow the building height in parts of the downtown to be increased to up to 55 feet from the current 35 feet limit. (See sidebar for a summary of the recommendations for setbacks and building height.) The Planning Commission listened as the sometimes boisterous crowd applauded many of the comments of the more than twenty residents who spoke both for and against the proposed recommendations. Some complained that community input to the process was sorely lacking and that the construct of the task force was weighted to the view of developers and architects and not the residents of Orinda. Many came to this Planning Commission meeting in response to a robocall, an automated phone call, encouraging them to attend to learn more about potential changes to ordinances and the General Plan related to downtown development.

Planning Department Director Emmmanuel Ursu explained that over 100 publicly-noticed meetings were held by the task force in the process of developing the proposed recommendations including six public workshops. Planning Commissioner Chris Kniel, who was a member of the process subcommittee of the task force, expressed some frustration regarding the public's perception of the lack of community involvement. "Getting public input was on our minds all the time," said Kniel.

Some residents felt that 55-foot tall buildings would morph Orinda's narrow downtown streets citing the new Mercantile Building on the much wider Mt. Diablo Boulevard in Lafayette as a comparison. Insufficient parking and excess traffic were other issues residents felt would be problematic with the introduction of four-story buildings into the downtown area. Potentially losing sight of the surrounding hills was the barrier to increased building height for several neighbors of the downtown areas such as the residents who live on or off Northwood and Southwood Drives. According to the task force report, the primary purpose of increasing building height up to 55 feet is to encourage downtown residential development in a mixed-use configuration. The potential for downtown residences to serve as downsizing options for Orinda's aging population has been mentioned in earlier meetings but did not resonate with some of the seniors on hand. "'I'm not going to live above a store in downtown Orinda," stated Kevin Hagan, adding that he felt parking was already short in many areas.

Not all of the feedback on the recommendations for downtown was negative. Several speakers commended the task force's work and a handful supported the proposed changes.

"I encourage you to take a hard look at the status quo," stated Rick Booth, who recently completed his term on the Planning Commission. "When you enter Orinda from the freeway you see Bev Mo and the back of buildings along Moraga Way. It's hardly a nice view," he added, also noting that the Phairs' building has long sat idle and that retailers are struggling to get by. Tom Trowbridge concurred with the need for downtown revitalization and supported the recommendations for increased building height to accommodate downtown residences. "The concept of in-town living in a mix of office, residential, and retail uses is a bold idea with much potential," stated Trowbridge. "Of course, it must be executed properly with well designed buildings in a more pedestrian-friendly environment than we have now."

The crowd dwindled down to about twenty following the conclusion of the extensive public comment segment, and the Planning Commission members went on to discuss the building height recommendation for over an hour. Ultimately the Commission decided that it required further information and requested staff to provide sketches that would demonstrate whether or not adjacent neighborhoods would be adversely impacted by the recommended building height increase.

The Planning Commission will continue to review the task force's recommendations for downtown development during its second regular meeting of the month, which is routinely held on the fourth Tuesday. At the May 25th meeting, the Commission will start with the recommendations on residential density and follow with lot coverage and open space, building setbacks, parking, and landscaping as time permits. Further review and discussion of building height will likely be conducted at the Commission's June 23rd meeting providing the height/view studies are ready at that time. All studies will be posted online as part of the staff report for the meeting ([www.cityoforinda.org](http://www.cityoforinda.org)).

### Summary of Task Force Recommendation

#### Building Setbacks

Require a setback of 10 feet from the face of the curb or more as necessary to preserve the canopy of existing street trees of street facing facades within 27 feet of ground level.

Portions of building above 27 feet shall be designed to step back in compliance with qualitative standards. Reduce interior side and rear setbacks to zero feet.

#### Building Height

Except for the Shell block, change the building height in Planning Areas\* 1 and 2 from 35 feet to 27 feet at the front setback line, or lower if necessary to preserve the canopy of existing trees, with a height of up to 55 feet (as measured to the center gable) for portions setback more than 10 feet from the face of the street curb and designed

to meet qualitative standards

In Area\* 4, maintain the existing 35-foot building height limit in all areas except the block bound by Camino Pablo, Moraga Way, and Brookwood Road, which is to change as in areas 1 and 2.

\*Definitions for Areas 1, 2, and 4

Area 1-Country Club Plaza: The approximately 4-acre triangular area formed by Camino Sobrante on the south, Camino Pablo to the west, and Orinda Way to the east.

Area 2-Village Center: The portion of downtown Orinda located south of Camino Sobrante and north of Highway 24 along both sides of Orinda Way.

Area 4-Theater District: The approximately 13.5-acre southeast quadrant of the intersection of Highway 24 and Camino Pablo, bound by Highway 24 and the BART station on the north, single-family and commercial office uses on the east, and the Highway 24 eastbound off ramp and commercial office uses to the west.

A complete copy of the task force recommendations is available online at the city website. Got to <http://www.cityoforinda.org>. Click on Departments (left column) then click on Planning Department, then click on Planning Process Review Task Force.

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