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Fighting for Paradise

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"I'm not someone who sees a communist under every leaf, but I see a communist under this one," said one speaker during the public forum period at the Orinda City Council's regularly scheduled meeting on January 31.

The remark made in jest prompted smiles among both Council members and attendees, and was indicative of the good humor displayed during intense discussions regarding the City's finances and the potential impact to the Orinda community of the Initial Vision Scenario (IVS) developed by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC).

A section of "Paradise Lost" was even quoted by one among the ten who expressed their opposition to the IVS and urged their fellow Orindans to become better informed about the far-reaching plan.

Often referred to as the "One Bay Area" strategy, the IVS was developed in response to California Senate Bill 375. Enacted in 2008, 375 requires "the inclusion of a 'Sustainable Communities Strategy' (SCS) integrating land-use planning and transportation in the federally mandated 25-year Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) with the goal of addressing global warming by reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) from cars and trucks while accommodating the region's population and job growth."

Analysis of this ABAG-MTC plan followed Council's mid-year finance review in which members discussed a continued decline in property tax revenues by an additional two percent - over and above the one percent decline that had been previously projected for year two of the City's current two-year budget cycle. Both the audio and the staff reports for this meeting are available on the City's web site.

The staff report for this meeting includes the strongly worded letter sent June 9 by Mayor Victoria Smith to Adrienne J. Tissier and Mark Green, the respective Chairs of ABAG and MTC, regarding the IVS:

"Most aspects of the Transit Town Center place type are appropriate for Orinda's PDA [Priority Development Area]; however, because approximately 40% of the land area within 1/2 mile of the Orinda BART station is regional open space (primarily EBMUD watershed), the number of households suggested for the place type is not appropriate in Orinda.

"In addition to the adjacent open space areas, the amount of land area suitable for development in downtown is further constrained by the narrow and long valley location of downtown that has a limited number of access points and thereby restricted circulation.... Some of these constraints to development are also assets to the community and to the region that the City is responsible for protecting."

Telling ABAG and MTC that "the household growth in the IVS is too aggressive," Smith also articulated the City's need for funding "for a local jitney to connect Orinda Village (north of highway 24) to the Theatre District (south of 24) and to BART," for improved bus service, and to cover the expenses that the City would incur as fallout from the ABAG-MTC plan.

Smith further injected a dose of reality, saying that between the City's 1985 incorporation and its 25th anniversary, Orinda added only 737 dwelling units. "It is not realistic to expect a 260% increase [to 1,920 units] in the rate of housing production in community that is mostly built out."

Although ABAG and MTC prepared four revised household and job growth scenarios in response to the input received from Bay Area community leaders, Orinda officials believe those projections continue to be way off the mark. Stating that the projections were "completely out of line and unrealistic for Orinda" because they were prepared by ABAG-MTC before the 2010 census data was released, City Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu advised the Council that staff will be telling the regional planning agencies to take another look at their figures. Council Member Dean Orr observed that the One Bay Area plan appeared "to be moving at some pace, some speed," at the direction of "jurisdictions outside of our authority," and asked if Orinda could simply opt to not comply with the regional planning. Ursu said that this was one option, but also explained that non-compliance could hurt Orinda because ABAG-MTC's planning is tied to regional housing allocations doled out by the State of California.

Orr then asked if other Bay Area cities had expressed concerns about the accuracy of ABAG-MTC's data. Ursu said there has been a great deal of "pushback," referencing the City of Lafayette's response as one example.

Smith likened the IVS to putting the cart before the horse. ABAG and MTC are expecting the City of Orinda to engage in extensive sustainability planning without providing the funds necessary to do so. She strongly urged ABAG and MTC to expand their public hearings beyond Dublin and Richmond to ensure that area residents will have their voices heard at programs presented at Lamorinda locations.

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