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Heated Housing Element Workshop Sparks Fear - But Also Determination

By Laurie Snyder



More than two dozen Orindans calmly milled around several information sharing stations following the city's housing element workshop June 26. Photo Ohlen Alexander

who took turns standing and shouting. Some were members of Orinda Watch, a group which came out against the recent Measure J road improvement bond and, in 2013, accused city officials of working outside the full view of the public to update Orinda's General Plan in order to bring high-density, low income housing to Orinda. Seemingly determined to obstruct the proceedings, the protesters even shouted down other audience members who were calling for quiet so that the presentation could continue.

"I'm intimidated by the yelling," said one resident who was willing to be quoted, but asked that her name not be used because she now fears for her physical safety. "I just came to find out what was going on."

"I really wanted to know the truth," said another who attended at the urging of a fellow dog walker because she'd been told government leaders were engaging in "political shenanigans." Disappointed because she couldn't hear the presenter and "appalled by the lack of decorum," she hopes future workshops will be scheduled by the city.

"This is an embarrassment for the community," said a third, expressing frustration that a small number of residents had prevented the larger group from receiving information they felt they needed to hear. Another younger resident concurred. Many in the auditorium were "new faces" - residents attending only their first or second council meetings who said they knew little about the housing element. Most said they planned to attend future city-sponsored events.

Had the program been allowed to progress as planned, the agenda would have unfolded as follows:

- 6:05 p.m. Welcome and Introductions
- 6:10 p.m. Presentation:
 - Housing Element update overview
 - Regional Housing Needs Allocation

"Forgiveness and reconciliation are not just ethereal, spiritual, other-worldly activities. They have to do with the real world. They are realpolitik, because in a very real sense, without forgiveness, there is no future." - Desmond Tutu

Shocking. Rude. Embarrassing. Frightening. Just some of the adjectives uttered by Orindans following the early end to the city's 2015-2023 Housing Element Community Workshop June 26.

The program began quietly with Jennifer Gastelum outlining the meeting's purpose. A representative from Pacific Municipal Consultants (PMC) - the firm approved by the Orinda City Council to help guide Orinda through the fifth cycle of a process mandated by state law, Gastelum had just advised attendees that she had amassed 14 years of experience working on 70 other housing elements.

But before she could explain the workshop's format to those in the nearly full auditorium, she was interrupted by a handful of angry individuals

Summary of City demographics/housing needs

Environmental Impact Report overview

Description of workshop activities

6:45-7 p.m. Workshop Activity Stations:

Station 1: Sign-in/Housing Element Overview

Station 2: Housing Programs and Services

Housing Types

Environmental Review

Potential Housing Sites

Housing Element Ideas and Suggestions

In his book, titled "In Defense of Civility," Middlebury College professor James Calvin Davis writes, "I like to define civility as the exercise of patience, integrity, humility and mutual respect in civil conversation, even (or especially) with those with whom we disagree." Although civil discourse, aimed at enhancing understanding, was derailed June 26, enough residents expressed a desire to hear directly from the consultant that city staff will try again at another workshop scheduled for July 9.

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[back](#)

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