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Orinda City Council Adopts Housing Element and Environmental Impact Report

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On April 21, after months of public hearings, workshops and other city governing body meetings - a fair number of which lasted four or five hours with Orinda residents speaking in favor of or against items as minute as punctuation in a document and as sweeping as their personal ideas of what the City of Orinda should look like in two decades - the Orinda City Council adopted a revised Housing Element for the city's General Plan, along with its related Environmental Impact Report (EIR).

According to the staff report, the "final key consideration" that council needed to ponder before making a decision to adopt its revised Housing Element or not was the "selection of a site to ... zone to accommodate a portion of the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) for 48 dwelling units at the State default density of up to 20 units per acre."

Council members reached this point after deliberating for months regarding the pros and cons of three possible RNHA locations (see "Public Comment Period Open for Orinda's Housing Element and EIR" in the Lamorinda Weekly's November 2014 online archives). After receiving often intense input from numerous Orinda residents, business owners, school leaders, et. al., the majority of council members expressed a preference for Alternative 1 (the Santa Maria site) at their April 7 meeting. Council then reaffirmed its selection of the Santa Maria site on April 21.

As part of this process, council signaled its intent to decrease any future multi-family development that could be planned for the Santa Maria site by reducing both the number of acres which could be impacted (from 3.2 to 2.4 acres) and the number of housing units which could be placed there (from 80 to 48). In response to one commenter who fretted over a future marred by "stack and pack housing" on the Santa Maria site, Mayor Steve Glazer reiterated that no construction is currently planned for the site, that the property owner - the Archdiocese of Oakland - was still in charge of making any decisions regarding whether or not to allow development of the site, and that any development proposed for the site down the road would face a rigorous public review process. He also pointedly reiterated that council's latest action reduced the impact of any future development on the site by decreasing both the number of housing units that could be built at Santa Maria (if the archdiocese were even to allow such development), as well as the size of the acreage that could be developed.

After council sifted through a list of possible final tweaks to what was the eighth draft of the revised Housing Element, Glazer closed the deliberations. Expressing satisfaction with the opportunity to "preserve almost an acre of open space" while having a Housing Element "in place for an eight-year cycle" rather than a four-year period, Council Member Dean Orr made the motion for council to adopt its revised Housing Element and related EIR. After receiving a second by Vice Mayor Victoria Smith, council then approved its fifth cycle Housing Element 4 to 1 with Council Member Eve Phillips voting no.

Staff has since sent the council-approved documents to the California Department of Housing and Community Development for certification. HCD has 90 days to review and approve or reject Orinda's proposed changes to the Housing Element of its General Plan. According to recent city communications, the "2.4-acre area will be delineated through a public hearing process amending the General Plan Land Use Map and Zoning Map. Per the adopted Housing Element, the City has two years to process the amendment on the Santa Maria site."

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