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Orinda's Crossroads Entryway Will See a Change of Appearance Soon

By Victor Ryerson



Walking path to Theatre Square (left) and Orinda Mini-Park (right) Photo Andy Scheck

A series of three unrelated items considered recently by the Orinda City Council could signal the possibility that the city's Crossroads gateway from the west will soon see major esthetic improvement - or not. As generally is the case in such matters, the answer lies in the availability of money to pay for the projects. And curiously, none of the council members indicated any awareness at the Sept. 1 council meeting that the three items were in any way related by their physical proximity to one another near the city's busiest and most visible street intersection.

The items did not require specific action by the council, but rather sought feedback on design and priority from the council members. The input will be used by staff to refine concepts for two projects planned next to the east side of Camino Pablo between Brookwood Drive and the BART station, and by Orinda's council representative to the Southwest Area Transportation Committee (SWATC) for local street improvements. SWATC's final expenditure plan is expected, among other things, to include a major revision of the intersection of Brookwood and Camino Pablo, which accommodates traffic from the eastbound Highway 24 off-ramp.

The most significant project from the esthetic standpoint is a plan to redesign the Orinda Mini-Park, the small corner park that is now almost lost between the busy traffic at the intersection and a row of redwood trees along the rear side of Theatre Square that were planted to provide screening. Those trees are the impetus for the change, as PG&E has announced that they must be removed because they are growing too close to the major high-voltage transmission lines overhead. Richard Westin of the Orinda Community Foundation (OCF), which is raising money to improve the park, told the Council that the site will be "stark and ugly" when PG&E removes the trees. "It's gonna shock the community when those trees come down," commented another speaker.

The conceptual design presented to the council by Parks and Recreation Director Michelle Lacy and park supporters is an undeniably attractive public space with cascading hardscaping, natural plantings, informal seating, and a "water feature" - a recirculating fountain - that would provide white noise for the benefit of park users. On one of the vertical stone walls would be an Orinda sign, "beautifully lit with LED lights [that] will say, 'Welcome to Orinda,'" Westin said.

The cost of the proposed park is in the \$400,000 to \$450,000 range, and therein lies the problem. Mayor Dean Orr expressed concern that the estimated cost had risen over time from \$57,000 to this level, and questioned whether it would be a wise expenditure of city funds at a time when the city is spending \$7 million for road projects. "It's a matter of principle," he said. Other council members also favored scaling down the concept, although they did not establish a target cost.

Westin presented an offer from OCF to fund \$225,000 of the cost if the city would match that figure, but the council demurred. This sum would pay for execution of the current design. Westin could not say whether OCF would provide matching funds for a scaled-down project, as he did not have the organization's authority to do so.

Just north of the Mini-Park site, separated from it by a small Contra Costa Sanitary District parcel, is the site of the second project discussed by the council. The project is a plan to improve the lighting from the BART station to Theatre Square, and bring the stairs and access ramp from the Camino Pablo sidewalk to the upper street level into compliance with Americans with Disability Act (ADA) standards. "Really, what's there now is quite pathetic," commented council member Darlene Gee.

A conceptual design incorporating ADA-compliant ramps separated by planted areas was presented to the council, along with designer LED lighting throughout the area. "I'm thrilled with the lighting," council member Amy Worth said, echoing the sentiments of the others. However, the council balked at the \$263,000 additional cost of the project above the current budgeted amount, which is funded by a \$250,000 BART grant and other sources. The council gave staff directions to eliminate certain features of the plan, including the planting and irrigation, to reduce the cost.

The final matter considered by the council was the SWATC Preliminary Expenditure Plan, which faces a long road to approval and, ultimately, a funding measure on the 2016 General Election ballot. Orinda will have at least three opportunities to provide input for the final plan before its anticipated approval in July of next year. The big issue for the city is improvement of the Camino Pablo/Highway 24 intersection, explained Public Works Director Chuck Swanson, so that piece of the city's gateway may also see major improvement in the foreseeable future.

These three discussion items portend inevitable changes in Orinda's most visible gateway over the next year or two, but how dramatic and attractive those changes will be still remains to be seen.

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