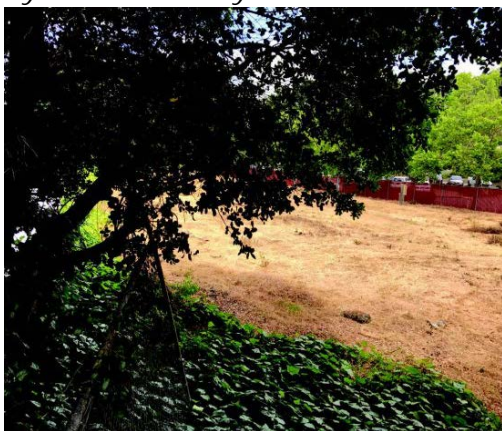


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Bella Oaks: Orangetheory Fitness but no Chase Bank

By Sora O'Doherty



Bella Oaks site at 25A Orinda Way.

Orinda City Council members clearly grappled with their dreams of what Orinda might become as they agreed to a waiver allowing Orangetheory Fitness, an interval training, heartbeat-based fitness center, to anchor a corner of the proposed development at 25A Orinda Way to be known as Bella Oaks.

Developer Paul Ugenti needed the waiver because the gym is not a Category A use - not strictly falling within the category that includes restaurants and retail businesses that were originally planned for the development.

And despite the concern expressed by Mayor Eve Phillips, the rest of the council could not see their way clear to also approve a waiver for Chase Bank to occupy the other street front corner of the development.

Ugenti told the council that he has been trying for a year to pin down tenants for Bella Oaks, and is in talks with businesses such as Coffee Shop and Urban Remedy in Lafayette, and The Gastropig in Oakland, but cannot get them to agree to open in Orinda without the presence of the anchor tenants, Orangetheory and Chase Bank. With both Orangetheory and Chase, Ugenti said, he would have leasing commitments equal to 90 percent of the building. After the waiver for Chase was denied, Ugenti said, "Despite this setback we will continue to work on our leasing agent in an attempt to replace Chase Bank as our anchor tenant. If we are unable to do so the future of the project is uncertain and our path unclear."

There were several concerns with the two waiver requests expressed by both council members and members of the public. Loyal patrons of the neighboring In Forma Fitness, which occupies 23A Orinda Way, urged the city council not to allow Orangetheory to open right next door, fearing that the competition would put owner Andrea Columbu out of business. Columbu, owner since 1995, clearly inspires loyalty and affection in the patrons of his establishment, but other speakers urged the council to allow Orangetheory. Those speakers want something different and said that there is room for both gyms, which cater to quite different users.

The second waiver request presented an even greater challenge to the council, particularly because banks are not open evenings and Sundays, which, they felt, would not contribute to the vibrancy they seek for downtown Orinda. In the staff report and further comments, Orinda appears to suggest that Chase has expressed a "preference" for a ground floor location, which Ugenti believes is a misunderstanding of Chase's position. Ugenti states that Chase does not want a second-floor location, an extremely rare location for banks. Chase Market Director of Real Estate Ronald J. Chester, urged the council to consider the fact that some 3,500 Chase customers from Orinda go to other Chase branches each month. Chester was clear that this figure represents Orindans who actually walk into a bank, not automatic teller machine users. Ugenti and Chester suggest that when a customer goes into a bank, they are more likely to combine that trip with other errands, such as getting dry cleaning done, or having coffee or lunch. Thus, they argue, even though the city does not derive sales tax from a bank, the presence of the bank should have a positive effect on city revenues.

The site of Bella Oaks was once a gas station, and has been vacant for decades. In 2014 Chase Bank applied for permission to build and occupy a two story building, but later withdrew the application. After Bella Oaks was approved by the Planning Commission, they denied permission for the bank to be located on the ground floor, but suggested that it might go in on the second floor, adjacent to the parking lot, and approved spaces for two ATMs on the ground floor.

Council member Darlene Gee noted that she was very conflicted, but could not approve the bank waiver, and Vice Mayor Amy Worth agreed with council members Gee and Dean Orr.

Phillips said, "Chase may not be the most exciting tenant, but we have 3,500 users." She said she was very concerned about the future of the project and wondered if this was the council's last chance to make it more than an empty lot. If the project fails, she added, she thinks the people of Orinda are going to be really frustrated with the council.

Council member Orr was unreceptive to suggestions that the street front footage could be reduced, but left a small opening for the applicant to return with a plan for a first floor bank that was internal and did not front the street.



Orangetheory Fitness in Walnut Creek. Photos Sora O'Doherty

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[back](#)

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