



Published April 27th, 2022

At Housing Element review, city council agrees to not recommend housing at St. Stephen's

By Sora O'Doherty

The Orinda City Council heard a detailed review of the draft Housing Element for the sixth cycle, and, in response to numerous public comments, agreed to not recommend housing be built on the site of the St. Stephen's church parking lot. Although the church had been willing to consider 30 housing units on its property, local residents in the area strongly objected. In response to public opinion, the church made it clear that it would not proceed with building housing on its parking lot. The city received over 100 emails on the proposed draft, one of which was signed by hundreds of local residents. Ted Urban wrote to urge the city to include the site on the grounds that it has relatively easy access to Highway 24 and is located next to a fire station.

The discussion of the draft included a presentation by Placeworks consultants Jennifer Gastelum and Cynthia Walsh. Orinda Planning Director Drummond Buckley and City Manager David Biggs were also available for questions. The Housing Element is an extremely complex process, dictated by state law, and the discussion continued over hours.

Placeworks went through the existing fifth cycle Housing Element, under which Orinda was only obligated to provide for the addition of 227 housing units and succeeded in having 346 building permits issued. However, none of those permits were for very-low or low-income units. The fifth Housing Element covered the period from 2015 to 2023. The sixth cycle covers the period of 2023 to 2031.

For the sixth Housing Element, Orinda has received a regional housing needs assessment (RHNA) number of 1,359, a more than 500% increase. Adding a 25% buffer, the number of housing units Orinda is required to provide for is 1,506, and Placeworks has succeeded in identifying 1,806 potential sites, of which 982 are designated for very-low to low-income housing. The city is not required to actually build any housing units, but must make reasonable provisions to allow such units to be built.

One of the issues that attracted a great deal of public interest and comment is the possibility of rezoning the BART parking lots for housing, which could, theoretically, provide enough housing to meet Orinda's RHNA for the sixth cycle. This approach was promoted by local resident Nick Waranoff and supported by other commenters. The problem with this approach, identified by Placeworks, is that the BART parking lot may not realistically be available for home building in a timeframe within the sixth cycle that will be acceptable to the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD).

While there has been a lot of building on BART parking lots in recent years, Orinda is in a somewhat unique position because the parking lots are located between the two directions of Highway 24 and do not have direct street access. In addition, the land is owned not by BART but by CalTrans, which is known to move slowly in matters of land transfers. Placeworks recommended that the BART parking lots be held in reserve for the seventh Housing Element.

As with everything involved in the Housing Element, the timeline is extremely complex. Orinda was required to make the draft Housing Element available for public comments for 30 days, plus an additional 10 days if any comments are received, which they have been. Following the public review, Orinda staff and consultants will make revisions and submit the draft to HCD. It is anticipated that this will occur in May. HCD will then have 90 days to review and provide comments back to the city. Staff anticipates receiving comments from HCD in August. After HCD comments are received, there will be a second public comment period and second round of revisions before submission to HCD. HCD will have 60 days to review the resubmittal.

Placeworks' long and extremely detailed document is available as part of the agenda packet for the Orinda City Council meeting of April 19, at <http://orindaca.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=2030&Inline=True>

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA