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Orinda Planning Commission approves first Lamorinda hydrogen filling station

By Sora O'Doherty

The Union 76 station on the corner of Moraga Way and Northwood Drive in the Orinda Theatre District will be able to sell hydrogen fuel, in addition to gasoline. The project was first proposed in December 2020 and was the subject of a study session in April 2022.

The plan, as approved, adds two hydrogen dispensers, one each between each set of existing gas pumps on the site. In addition to the pumps, there will be an above-ground hydrogen fuel tank and related equipment added to the facility. As a result of the new equipment, the station will lose 8 of their existing 16 parking spaces. While the station has been renting out parking spaces, the city is requiring that the remaining parking spaces be reserved for customer use.

The Union 76 station dates back to the '50s or '60s in downtown Orinda. There are currently four gas pumps, a convenience store, and a service bay, all of which will remain. The new hydrogen fuel dispensers will be provided by FirstElement Fuel, Inc., providers of True Zero hydrogen fuel. According to FirstElement's website, the company is committed to building a better world by addressing the three major energy and environment challenges that face us today: clean air, energy security and global climate change. "Fuel cell vehicles are widely recognized as the ultimate automobile technology for reducing our impact on energy and the environment," according to FirstElement.

Some issues regarding the station were resolved at the Planning Commission meeting on Aug. 9, when the project was unanimously approved by commissioners. City staff had recommended that the increase in the size of the canopy not be authorized because it did not appear to be driven by any operational concerns. However, the applicant explained that a larger canopy was required because of the need to move the columns supporting the canopy to allow space for the new fuel dispensers. The applicant did agree to work with the city to find a solution that would allow the new dispensers, but keep the increase to the canopy size to a minimum.

At the early study session, the Commission had made some suggestions about landscaping, preferring a "living wall" of plants to screen the new tank and other equipment. However, the applicant explained that they are not proposing to implement this suggestion owing to the continued drought in California. They suggested a fence covered with artificial vegetation, but that option did not receive the support of either staff or the Commission. A fence painted to match the building was eventually agreed upon. However, the applicant is planning to add additional street trees to increase the landscaping of the station. Commissioner Brandyn Iverson wished for more, but the other commissioners, including Commissioners Mautner and Smith, noted that this is a service station, not a park.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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