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Orinda's Senior Affordable Housing Project Getting Closer

By Andrea A. Firth

"We're making meaningful progress," states Orinda Council Member Amy Worth regarding the senior affordable housing project to be built on the city-owned former library site located at 2 Irwin Way.



Proposed senior affordable housing development, entry on Irwin Way. Drawing provided by Eden Housing.

Orinda's City Council received an update on the project from Eden Housing Senior Project Manager Woody Karp at its meeting on April 13th. Eden Housing was appointed by the City Council in October of 2008 to develop the property, which is adjacent to both the Community Park and the Orinda Senior Village. As proposed, the four-story building will include 70 affordable one-bedroom rental apartments. Seniors, who are 55 years of age or older, with annual household incomes of \$18,000 to \$31,000 would currently qualify. (Only one member of the household must meet the age requirement.)

The concept for this affordable senior housing complex in downtown Orinda was initiated over 15 years ago. "It's a long process," states Worth, adding, "The first thing we had to do was to identify a location [for the housing project]. That in itself took a long time. Once City Hall's location was identified, that opened up the old library site." The City received \$2.5 million in fees from the Wilder project development agreement to apply to affordable housing, which should approximate the value of the land to be contributed to the project, according to City Manager Janet Keeter.

Securing the funding for an affordable housing project is a complex, multi-step process, which typically requires applying for and winning grants from county, state and federal programs according to Karp. "It's gotten harder. There are limited funding sources available," he notes, adding that the costs associated with developing these sorts of facilities are high, up to 25% more than prevailing construction costs due to wage requirements mandated by the State.

"All cities are mandated to provide a certain number of affordable housing units. In Contra Costa County the money we receive for infrastructure and roads projects is tied to meeting these requirements," adds Worth. "Currently, there is a huge gap between the need for affordable housing units and the funds available."

The Eden project is designed to include a community room with a full kitchen, a computer lab and library, an exercise room, and a courtyard with a resident garden. "It's designed to build community," says Worth. "It makes a lot of sense to build this project near the downtown area in close proximity to transportation, retail outlets, and other services." The accessibility of the location has also worked in favor of the project during the competitive grant application process, according to Worth.

The frontage for the building will be on Irwin Way facing the Orinda Community Church. The proposed project includes 44 onsite parking spaces for the residents and visitors. In addition Eden Housing has tentative approval from the Orinda Community Church to develop a 10-space parking lot on the church property to mitigate the loss of community parking currently located adjacent to the tennis courts. The project design also includes a staircase from the property down to the ramp on Orinda Way, and a sidewalk along Irwin Way.

Applications for residency will probably be evaluated in 2013, according to Karp. "We have a very rigorous application process," he states. "First and foremost applicants must meet the income restrictions." Eden also conducts financial and criminal background checks and reviews prior rental payment and behavior experience.

Eden Housing submitted development applications and plans for the project to the Orinda Planning Department in December of 2009, and story poles for the project will be erected in May. Eden plans to hold two community meetings in May at the Orinda Community Church (10 Irwin Way) to present the plans for the development and to answer residents' questions.

"This project will provide a safe, comfortable, convenient environment for senior residents. I think it will be a tremendous asset to Orinda," says Worth.

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