

Letters to the Editor

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email: letters@lamorindaweekly.com; Regular mail: Lamorinda Weekly, P.O.Box 6133, Moraga, CA 94570

Editor:

One upon a time, there was an idyllic village, named Semi-Rural, situated in a narrow mountain canyon, surrounded by sylvan ridgelines and open space. The hard-working and well-educated citizens of Semi-Rural treasured their village mightily.

One day, the civic leaders of Semi-Rural were approached by a mining company named Milder, promising to bestow large amounts of tax revenue and civic improvements on Semi-Rural. After much discussion, a deal was cut. But, alas, the project stalled. There would be no Milder tax revenue and no civic improvements. Civic leaders, who had already made promises to the citizens of Semi-Rural, based on that tax revenue, became desperate.

And so an idea was hatched. "Let's do what those flatlander towns are doing and recruit developers to build high-rise condos near our commuter rail station. We can skim off tax revenue from the sale of these condos and then collect more money every year in property tax. We just need to re-zone parts of Semi-Rural and jack-up the building height limit."

"But the citizens of Semi-Rural will never go along with that," says one.

"Don't worry, it's all about marketing. Let's put some lipstick on this plan, and brand it as 'vibrant downtown re-vitalization.' We can recruit a couple of pro-developer comrades to write the plan, and give them a pre-programmed mission statement to get what we want. Under no circumstances do we use any of the following terms: transit village, high rise, high density, traffic, parking, noise, merchant displacement, redevelopment project or citizen vote. Then we give marching orders to all the civil servants to fast-track this puppy, and git'er dun before anyone knows what's really going on."

But the citizens of Semi-Rural were not fools. And so, a grass roots effort began to percolate among the citizens of Semi-Rural. Questions were asked. The answers fell short. Terms such as "referendum, lawsuit, and election alternatives", began to find their way into the daily conversation of Semi-Rural's citizens and there was much consternation.

Thank goodness, Orinda's elected and appointed Public Servants, the citizens' Stewards of the Public Trust, would never let Orinda suffer the same fate, which befell the village of Semi-Rural.

Hmmmmmm.....

Owen Murphy
Orinda

Editor:

From Mayor Tom McCormick's Open Forum piece in the last Lamorinda Weekly, one is led to believe that if only we can demolish downtown Orinda and put in a massive, five-story condominium complex, there will be "a charming flower and tree filled environment for all." And though overwhelming crowds were against this downtown vision at recent planning meetings, he apparently considers opponents ignorant, as he condescendingly insists that "a majority of those who understood" approve.

But perhaps none of his comments are more far-fetched than his suggestion that the "fastest and best way" to increase sales tax revenues in Orinda is to bulldoze the block currently containing CVS, Orinda Hardware, Europa, Loard's and BevMo, among many others - and replace it with the towering condos.

For one, this block contains some of the most thriving businesses in all

Orinda (not to mention the types of businesses that small towns need). Those businesses are now providing a huge percentage of Orinda's sales tax revenue - what happens during the 2-3 years while they are evicted and the new buildings are being constructed? All that sales tax will be lost. And once built, there is no guarantee that any stores will occupy the new monoliths, or that they will be successful. There could end up being the same vacant storefronts now seen in the similarly "revitalized" Pleasant Hill.

Meanwhile, Orinda City Council has recently prevented sales tax revenues. The Chevron station was barred from expanding their retail into an already existing building, which would have given Orinda a much-needed convenience store and added thousands to city coffers. 24 Hour Fitness was kept from filling the old department store, which still sits empty five years later. Not only is Orinda thus without the sales tax from any full-service gym, but as folks tend to do their errands shopping close by their gyms, other Orinda businesses lost out there as well.

No, despite McCormick's claims, this downtown plan seems only to be a gift to developers - one which would destroy Orinda's unique small-town charm forever.

Scott Zeller, MD
Orinda

Editor:

In regards to the commentary about the Redevelopment Plan by Orinda Mayor Tom McCormick in your last issue, I've looked at the 2010 Orinda revenue budget. The total amount expected to be collected from pure sales tax (the full amount includes a one-time sum expected to be received from the state and referred to as the "triple flip") is \$753,000. This already includes the taxes from such high-sales stores as Safeway and Rite Aid. How much can Mr. McCormick realistically expect the sales tax revenues to rise after leveling downtown and putting in new high rise buildings? How long would it take for any increase in tax revenue to recover the lost revenues during eviction and reconstruction?

The current annual Orinda budget is already over \$11 million, with sales tax income comprising only around nine percent of that. The Mayor's wish list from his article would seem to cost many more millions, and could not possibly be covered by increased sales tax revenue, even if the downtown plan works far better than expected.

Seeing this, why is the Mayor insisting that downtown Orinda must be demolished so sales tax revenue can be increased? Is there something we're not being told?

Jack Kopec
Orinda

Editor:

Imagine an explosion and fire in the same block as the fire station and it takes the fireman over 20 minutes to respond. It happened in Orinda on Saturday. Tragically two workers up 30 feet on a cherry picker got too close to the power lines causing thunderous explosions and setting themselves on fire. Citizens from the nearby farmer's market watched in horror as the men burned. The 911 calls were placed at 9:45 AM and fire crews did not show until after 10 AM. Their travel distant 100 yards! This was a sad display of how shabbily our highly compensated emergency personnel perform. The burn victims, naked from the flames and perched high atop their equipment waited in severe pain for an agonizing length of time. This unconscionable lapse in responsiveness should be investigated. Fire officials are well paid and have incredible pensions and benefits. Residents deserve better.

Jim Bradley
Lafayette

Editor:

The success of the Moraga Community Faire held on May 8 at the Rheem Shopping Center is directly related to the generous support of many people and many Moraga businesses. In these days when corporations are being severely criticized, we are fortunate to have community-minded and financially generous faces in CVS, in Mechanics Bank, in Aegis and Moraga Royale, and in Safeway.

Private businesses like the Moraga Country Club, Dr. Scott Lothamer, and Moraga Retreat Care Homes also gave generously. Because Union Bank, Neighborhood Computers, and our own Park Foundation paid the rental fees, no parent had to pay a dime to have a child play in the Bounce House or climb the 26' wall. 5A Rent A Space and three employees worked tirelessly to bring a wonderful collection of cars together to create Moraga's second classic car show, in addition to substantially funding the costs.

Our thanks also goes to many in-kind contributors like Moraga Hardware and Lumber, the UPS store, Verducci Entertainment, Champagne Designs, OSH, Radio KKDV, the Lamorinda Weekly, and Proclaim Promotions. Their contributions of time, publicity, and loan of materials greatly added to another successful event for our town.

The making of this Community Faire is one of the highest expressions of "community" that this town has. We, a committee of the Chamber of Commerce, applaud all who made the Faire such a delightful place to connect with others, laugh and relax, learn something new, and so much more. Let's meet at the Faire again next year on May 14, 2011!

Ellen Beans & Grant Stubblefield (co-chairs)
Moraga

Editor:

The Lafayette Chamber of Commerce has been working in the background over the last few years to remind you why it is so important to shop local. The city's general fund which pays for police, road repairs and basic serv-

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ices gets revenue from a few basis sources. The largest share comes from Property Tax. The second largest bucket is sales tax. Typically, Lafayette gets about 24% of their money from local sales tax. Currently it is more like 21-22% because of the slow economy. We don't have car dealerships or big box stores to help fill the coffers. That said, we thrive on our small businesses, owned and operated by local merchants that hire local residents. When you spend your money in a big box store the money leaves our city and never comes back. When you buy local, you are supporting our city and the individuals who live and work here. These are the same businesses that give out merchandise a gift cards when you child's school is having an auction. They are here spending their money and that money re-circulates.

This is no trivial matter. Many residents of Lafayette have pledged to shop local. And when our neighbor cities were losing sales tax by double digit figures, we held steady. The poor economic conditions have caught up with us but we are still ahead of the curve.

Next time you head for the on-ramp to Hwy 24 to go shopping in Walnut Creek or the mall, ask yourself, "Can I find what I need right here in Lafayette?" You might save some gas, save some time and support your local merchants and community at the same time.

Lafayette now has a unique program that supports local shopping and saving money at the same time. It is as easy as 1,2,3.

1. Stop by your Friendly Lafayette Chamber Office or the Thursday night Farmers' Market and pick up your TRY LAFAYETTE FIRST "KEY CARD"
2. Visit our website www.trylafayettefirst.com and find the merchants and service companies that are participating in our "city wide" discount program
3. Head to downtown Lafayette, present your card and save at our local businesses.

Put your money where your house is! Support your local businesses! You will be glad you did!

Jay Lifson
Lafayette

Editor:

Demolition and rebuilding of downtown Orinda raises serious questions about Orinda's environment and finances. Orinda's Mayor Thomas McCormick and the Orinda Planning Commission want to "redevelop" downtown, razing existing buildings and installing residential units for senior citizens. The redevelopment plan calls for the construction of buildings up to 55 feet high and the creation of new stores.

The idea that senior citizens want to live in downtown Orinda is very speculative. Living downtown above retail spaces without the amenities seniors hope for will not appeal to seniors. The noise and pollution downtown will deter seniors. Senior Orindans retiring from their homes want to live in a place like Rossmoor. Rossmoor's premises include golf, swimming, and medical assistance. Parking in downtown Orinda is often hard to find. Putting in more housing will only make parking much more difficult than it already is.

The proposed height limit of 55 feet for newly erected buildings will destroy Orinda's semi-rural, village-like atmosphere. The current height limit is 35 feet. Thus, a 55-foot height limit is an increase of 57 percent. The real estate developers want to build higher buildings. Most Orinda residents do not want four or five story buildings.

Tall buildings obscure the scenic views of the nearby hills. It will give our downtown the kind of congested feeling associated with much of downtown Walnut Creek.

If downtown Orinda's existing stores are demolished, a majority of retail tenants will have to move. They may well not return because of increased rents in new buildings. Moreover, any new storefronts might go unoccupied because the new property taxes will, in all likelihood, be much higher than the old property taxes. At a time when Orinda's roads are badly in need of repair, this is no time to reduce funds in the city's coffers. The monetary effect will be the opposite of Mayor McCormick is proposing.

Some of the existing downtown businesses may close forever. If someone likes the corned beef sandwiches at the Europa restaurant or the gyros at the Petra Café, the buyer may not be able to obtain appropriate substitute foods in or near Orinda.

When adjacent Lafayette wanted to do some downtown redevelopment, that city hired a professional city planner. Orinda has done nothing of the sort. Orinda would benefit if an objective, and professional city planner was brought into Orinda's redevelopment scheme. Spending money on such a planner before any change could occur is money well spent.

Before any aspect of downtown Orinda is changed, there should be a survey of Orinda's residents. If the Orinda City Council approves a redevelopment plan, the council must allow residents, in a city wide referendum, to accept or reject the plan. It's very unlikely that the majority of Orindans would approve of these proposals.

Kent Hagen
Orinda

Dear Editor,

I have read with much interest the numerous letters relating to the proposed prohibition of leaf blowers in Orinda, though I'm not sure why this specific device is being singled-out. There are many other sources of noise that seem equally bothersome (e.g., chainsaws, jackhammers, weed whackers, wood chippers). To me, the Orinda municipal code (Chapter 17.39) provides sufficient restrictions on noise within our community. Unfortunately, knowledge and/or observance of the code requirements is sorely lacking among the residents and hired worker in my neighborhood.

Countless times, my hearing has been assaulted by gardeners and construction workers starting well before the permitted starting time (8:00 am on weekdays, 10:00 am on weekends), or well after permitted stopping time (6:00 pm on weekdays, 5:00 pm on weekends). I've heard lawn mowers, leaf blowers, nail guns, chainsaws, backhoes, and heavy air compressors as early as 7:30 am on weekend mornings, or as late as 8:00 pm on any night of the week. When approached, the response from those operating power tools in violation of the code has included polite/apologetic ("sorry, I did not know about the time limits"), defensive ("I need to start before it gets too hot", "I need to work longer hours to feed my family", "I need to late to get the job done today"), and downright rude ("I work all over Contra Costa County and don't care about the code in Orinda", "if you want me to stop, you'll need to call the police").

Better enforcement and observance of the existing time restrictions would go along way towards solving the concerns over noise-pollution.

Bill Horstman
Orinda

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