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Orinda's Downtown Parking Malady May Be on the Mend

By Laurie Snyder

Parking in Orinda is exasperating. Local streets and lots around the downtown are cramped by commuters crippled by BART's crummy parking, film buffs flocking to the Orinda Theatre and foodies searching out something scrumptious at Shelby's and other popular eateries. Plus, perfect parking storms also occur on the Village side of town when the scheduling of Community Center classes collides with that of concerts, city government meetings and other special events.

Interestingly, Orinda's parking nightmare is actually not new - as evidenced by an Orinda Historical Society file which documents past efforts by city and Orinda Chamber of Commerce leaders to find a solution.

The Chamber's most recent nudge - on Feb. 19 - was a proposal to make it easier for employees of downtown businesses to park on side streets in order to free up spaces near the businesses Orindans want to patronize. That proposal requests that the city issue employee parking permits to allow all day parking on streets in and around the Crossroads area that currently have a 4-hour parking limit.

No action was taken, though, because the city council wanted to allow more time for residents to provide input, which occurred at two public meetings April 8 - following the mailing of 98 meeting notices to commercial and residential property owners in and near the Crossroads theater district.

According to the staff report for the council's May 7 meeting, the trial period would help city officials assess the effect of converting current unrestricted and no parking areas on Bates Boulevard "to all day permit parking and 4-hour restricted parking for non-permitted parking" to "provide approximately 40 spaces for a permit program."

Council members would then determine whether or not permanent changes should be made to existing ordinances. (The staff report, available on the city's website, includes a map.)

In deliberating, the council asked how many spaces are available at Theatre Square's garage for employees -173 out of 330 total; as well as how many workers might participate-roughly 40-50 at any given time out of a total of 75 who might need permits. Council member Dean Orr asked if staff had researched potential safety issues with the public works and police departments, and was advised by city manager Janet Keeter that staff had done so.

"We're going to have strangers walking around our neighborhood after dark," complained Orinda resident Owen Murphy. Saying he has nothing against local employees walking to their cars at shifts' end, he asked, "How will we know who's an employee or not?" Murphy also stated that he had heard several employees express fear for their safety when taking BART - not at the Orinda station when boarding the train, but upon arrival at their destination stations elsewhere.

David Pierce, a local real estate broker who has lived in Orinda since before the city's incorporation, voiced frustration at the city's lack of progress, and said businesses are losing people to cities where parking is easier.

Al Daily worried about pedestrians. "With no sidewalks, allowing parking on both sides of lower Bates will force walking children and adults to be closer to being hit by a car." Steve Goodman predicted increased thievery - while a 41-year resident strongly supported the pilot, reminding those in attendance that, of the 18 businesses on Moraga Way, most do not have their own parking.

Chamber president Sylvia Jorgenson urged the council to move forward with the trial period. "This is really important to our community and businesses. We've got to start someplace."

In responding to speakers fearful of others coming into their neighborhoods, council member Victoria Smith reminded listeners that Orindans who like living near downtown restaurants and shops enjoy those experiences precisely because of the workers who provide service at those establishments.

Council directed staff to investigate and propose a pricing structure for the pilot in relation to other parking options in town, recommend which department should administer the program and how many permits to issue, and project a timeframe for the pilot before returning to the council for further review.

"This is not going to solve all of the parking problems in downtown," observed Orr, who added that the pilot, while just a small step, is "a good first step."

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