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Early Childhood Education a Phair Bet?

Orinda Planning Commission okays preschools in commercial areas; will continue review of Fountainhead application

By Laurie Snyder



Phair building on Avenida de Orinda Photo Ohlen Alexander

During an over five-hour meeting Aug. 13, the Orinda Planning Commission weighed in on two design review applications for new homes before its public hearing of the proposal by Fountainhead Montessori to transform the historic, but long vacant Phair's store in the Orinda Village.

According to the staff report, the "application proposes the construction of a new, two-story building at 10 Avenida de Orinda...The existing structures, known as the Phair's buildings, would be demolished and replaced with a preschool, along with retail spaces along Orinda Way."

Discussion centered on whether or not city regulations permit operation of preschools at any sites currently zoned for commercial use. Ten Orinda residents and others who work or have students at Fountainhead spoke in favor of the project. Another 10 spoke against in a civil debate in which opponents frequently praised Fountainhead for the quality of instruction delivered to Orinda youngsters.

Robert and Karen Burt observed that the "Phair's property and adjoining properties - including the vacant land behind Phair's - represent a one-time planning and development opportunity that would occur if the Phair's property alone were to be developed for a school. Added David Anderson, "The preschool is certainly a worthwhile institution for parents, children and members of the community. But, the school has no place - per common sense, but most importantly per our Municipal Code - in our commercial district."

One segment of the code cited frequently by opponents reads, "Places of religious assembly and preschools are appropriately located in residential areas if served by arterial or collector roads, subject to review of impacts."

Conversely, Orinda Watch members and other supporters cited regulations requiring the city to "create a vibrant community center by encouraging a variety of businesses which will create pedestrian interaction and pedestrian-scale activities. This will happen, they said, as Fountainhead visitors stop off at local restaurants.

Julie Schadlich expressed her hope "that the members of the Planning Commission and the City Council will see the value of a school being built in the downtown area, close to facilities such as the Orinda Library, the Orinda Community Center, the park. ...I believe that children enlighten a community and bring spirit to its residents."

Commissioners opted to hear residents' concerns regarding potential impacts to Orinda but then decided, due to the late hour, to act only on the question of whether or not city regulations allow preschools to operate in commercial areas. On a 5 to 2 vote (Carlos Baltodano and Joe McGrath dissenting), the commission ruled that current regulations do sanction this type of usage, subject to the approval of use permits.

California Environmental Quality Act and land use entitlement reviews were slated to be taken up at the commission's Aug. 27 meeting. To learn more, visit the city's website.

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