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Public Forum

Negative History of Orinda's Downtown Task Force

Over a year ago, I attended an Orinda downtown Task Force workshop in order to get updated. Much to my surprise, in front of the audience, stood the co-chair of the proposed Downtown Plan. He is probably the most controversial developer we have ever had in Orinda. This alerted me to the seriousness of this matter.

The developer's track record has usually included proposals for offices and condos. If he had succeeded, we would not have our downtown Community Park, Community Center, or our Library. Years ago, he had also made a flagrant attempt to demolish the Orinda Theatre and build a megastructure on that small city block. He was not conforming to Orinda's planning laws, so the project was eventually blocked. There was a precedent-setting decision put forth by the California Supreme Court.

But this attitude of "full speed ahead" seems to be the mentality of this Task Force. The same developer said to me at that meeting that part of the Downtown Plan was to rip out the smaller movie theatre(s) on the corner and replace the area with a restaurant, maybe Il Fornaio he added. Fortunately, the plan eventually died. The landmark theatre is the symbol of our town and is featured everywhere. We are defined by it. Isn't it interesting that some think the theatre is dispensable?

Out of nowhere, there are also two architects promoting their "Orinda Vision," making the rounds around town giving presentations with their sketches. One of them has proposed visions in other cities. In Orinda, "Spanish Steps" (as in Rome) would be constructed where Bev Mo is now. My understanding is this is because most of the structures (from CVS up to Nation's) would be mowed down to make way for new construction. Their drawings show putting businesses like Xerox in place of the historic Bank Trust building where the small theatres are. When asked about their interest in historic structures of Orinda, one architect replied, "Oh, they won't be showing movies at the Orinda Theatre 20-40 years from now."

Successes of Orinda Theater

I'm sure the two men who lease the 3 Orinda Theaters would not favor the comment above. How about the great success that the California Independent Film Festival (CAIFF) has had in their classic film showings with Q&As with film actors? They are mostly sold out, including 3 showings in one day recently. The Lamorinda Film and Entertainment Foundation is planning 21 days of special events yearly. And CAIFF is having a film festival in Orinda from April 22-25.

When Theatre Square was first opened, it was filled with shops and restaurants. Many in the community feel the first floor retail tenants have been treated less than respectfully through the years --- raising the rent on small businesses, taking percentages of their meager profits, making more demands, and adding fees. The original plan was to have retail pay less rent and the offices on the upper floors to be charged more.

City Hall vs. the Roads

Consider the ill-timed decision by the City, when our streets were crumbling, to build a \$22 million City Hall way up on a hill. It is inaccessible to most unless they drive up there, defeating the green aspect of the structure. The City Hall looks more like an office building than a real City Hall, which is usually the heart of a town. City Hall's location was to be at the former Orinda Library site, conveniently located next to the Park.

There was little public input on that decision on City Hall. Then, two measures to raise funds to repair the streets were soundly voted down by residents. Recently, a public opinion poll determined Orindans would not vote for a new tax to fix our roads and infrastructure.

In addition, Pulte Homes apparently is stalled on the Pine Grove school property. Senior housing at the former library site hasn't broken ground. Wilder is just getting started. Where is the affordable housing that is required for Orinda?

Limited Funds

In this economy, with no extra money in the city coffers, this does not appear to be the time to amend our General Plan. Construction, more traffic, lonely underground parking, and more density could be the result --- as guards already stand outside of local banks which have been repeatedly robbed. This open city in which we live is coveted by many in this day and age -- and is the appealing feature of Orinda; it is one of the reasons people want to move here. Many in the community like having a unique, eclectic village.

The majority of residents should decide the direction of our downtown --- not 5 volunteer city council members, a planning commission, a few Task Force members and a planning official. We pay the property tax. We should decide. The 25th anniversary of Orinda's incorporation comes up for celebration in July; the intention was to have local control, not be dictated to. Bureaucrats taking over and construction of an unnecessarily large City Hall are what some feared most if we did incorporate --- and that's what happened.

The decision to incorporate stemmed from the debacle trying to tear down the Orinda Theatre and the attempt to build an unreasonably high (5-6 stories) and dense structure at Theatre Square. The hope for residents to really once again have local control should be alive and well. If you want the City Council to respect us, include us in a vote for consensus, or have a Town Hall meeting, you can register your name and local address on my email at

annocnye@aol.com. See you at the meetings.

Ann O'Connell-Nye, Orinda

Ann O'Connell-Nye founded The New Orinda News and was its 1st Editor when Orinda incorporated, chaired the city-appointed Historic Landmarks Committee, and was named Volunteer of the Year in 2005 for Orinda.

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