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Published December 22nd, 2010

Downtown Visioning-Round 2

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About 80 residents recently attended the second downtown development workshop sponsored by the City and aimed at getting community input to create a vision for the future of Orinda's commercial districts. Although not quite the size crowd that gathered for the first workshop held in October, a similar debate over if, what, and how to change Orinda's downtown ensued.

Some residents challenged the need and viability of the downtown "revitalization" concept. "Orinda is a place where I live. It's a bedroom community. Retail is less important, I'm not really sure that I want [downtown] to be vital," said one woman. Another added, "Retail and semi-rural is an oxymoron."

Yet others lamented that Orinda's commercial districts are tired and provide limited retail, restaurant, and service options. "Celebrated, well-used, vital retail may be a possibility for Orinda. Don't avoid this because you fear something awful could happen," stated one gentleman.

The something awful for one faction of the audience was the idea of raising the building height from the current 35-foot limit to 55-feet as proposed by the City task force that drafted recommendations for the downtown planning process. A supporter of the building height status quo called for any increase in height to be placed before the voters in a city-wide referendum. But others found the argument against increased building height, specifically 55 feet, arbitrary and unclear. They identified the need for more information and visual aids to show what a 55-foot tall building looks like in various parts of the City.

It's unlikely that any change will come soon. "We are in the first stage of gathering input, and we will continue these workshops to collect input from all sectors of the community," said Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu as he outlined the process, which could take as long as two years. "We will use the community's vision to update the City's General Plan," added Ursu. "The General Plan is a long-term document, but it needs to evolve as the residents' views change over time," he stated, noting that the last comprehensive update to the plan was done in 1987.

Based on the input from both workshops, one point of consensus among residents is the desire for a vibrant, sustainable retail environment in the downtown districts according to workshop facilitator, Chris Beynon of MIG in Berkeley. However, opinions diverged as to whether this is best achieved through new development or by supporting existing businesses, and residents were also divided on the type of retail they want.

How to overcome the BART/freeway barrier between The Crossroads and Orinda Village to create a more connected downtown also sparked a lot of discussion.

"There is no plan," said Beynon in closing. "What you are doing here is building the plan."

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