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Orinda's Housing Element Continues to Evolve

By Laurie Snyder

"... our most successful leaders have succeeded because of their devotion to the public good.... Our unique democracy - still an historical experiment - will "long endure," prosper and provide leadership only in direct proportion to the participation of all our citizens. It is that important." - Excerpt from "An Open Letter to American Citizens on Constitution Day," September 17, 2013 - Sandra Day O'Connor, Associate Justice (Ret.), and John Glenn, United States Senator (Ret.)

It seemed fitting, at the close of Constitution Day - the annual day on which America's children focus their attention on our nation's greatest, guiding document - that the Orinda City Council was in session Sept. 17 and hearing from area citizens concerned about a diverse range of subjects - safety at Bay Area BART stations, exciting plans for this year's community restaurant tour, and one resident's surprising encounter in Orinda with an assault weapon similar to the one used in the Washington Naval Yard shooting.

During the main event of the evening, debate continued regarding the city's development of a legally required housing element. Once again, the public comment period drew nearly 20 speakers. This time, however, the tenor of the dialogue was far more civil with council members, staff and residents thanking each other for the hours devoted to reviewing and commenting on the document - text that remains in draft form despite the fact that Orinda is the only city in Contra Costa County which has not yet adopted a housing element. Failure to approve and secure state certification of this document before the end of January could derail the city's receipt of critically needed planning and transportation funds, including a potential \$553,000 grant currently being sought to fund road improvements for the Ivy Drive neighborhood.

During the City Council's most recent confab - the sixth in a series of public meetings since 2009, two possible versions of a draft housing element were presented. One was an update to the draft released by the city in June, and included adjustments following input by council members and the public at an Aug. 20 meeting.

The other, which has been termed "the Citizens' Edit" by its creators, was presented by members of Orinda Watch (www.orindawatch.org), which has been receiving guidance from Bay Area Citizens (bayareacitizens.com), the organization being represented by the Sacramento-based Pacific Legal Foundation (www.pacificlegal.org) as it challenges Plan Bay Area.

Both drafts of the housing element are far too lengthy to summarize effectively in the short space available for this article. Readers are urged to visit the city's website to hear the meeting's audio and view both draft versions of the element and related documents.

Terming Orinda Watch's edits "very substantive," Councilmember Dean Orr pointed to entire sections of the June document that were removed when that group's members demanded that the city's housing element be advocacy neutral and only contain items that were absolutely necessary for the city to receive HCD certification.

Cautioning that there were some components to the Orinda Watch draft "which may represent the views of some citizens of Orinda but not others," Councilmember Victoria Smith suggested that further analysis by the City Council and staff be undertaken to assess which of the most recent citizen recommendations should be incorporated.

Vice mayor Sue Severson observed that the needs of seniors hoping to downsize to smaller, market rate homes rather than the affordable housing options offered for lower income residents had not yet been factored into the draft element, and should be included by staff for council members' next review.

Mayor Amy Worth concurred, stating that the document should reflect how housing is impacted as Orinda residents "evolve from a market rate income to a retirement income."

Staff will incorporate the City Council's latest directives, and will bring another revised draft element back for additional public review sometime in October.

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