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Gateway Valley Shakes off Troubled Past

By Laurie Snyder

"They say that the gateway of the morning is guarded by the twin lions Sef and Duau: Yesterday and Tomorrow. If the sun were to linger near the one, mourning what is past, or hesitate before the other, fearing what is to come, the earth would grow cold and die. I learned long ago to mourn what is gone and then continue living." - Diana Wilder

The pace of change in Orinda has long been described by Orindans as "glacial." One only need recall the history of the Gateway Valley off Highway 24 to appreciate just how often Orinda plans heat up only to grow cold and die.

Back in 1994, the Orinda City Council attempted to thaw things out a bit when they authorized the city to enter into an agreement with Pacific New Wave Corporation, but the manner in which the developer hoped to transform the Gateway Valley troubled many. An opposition group, Save Our Open Space-Gateway Valley, formed and, with input from the Sierra Club and Golden Gate Audubon, froze the initial proposal and further revisions. Along the way, a smaller effort - Montanera - was also considered, but faced strong opposition because its golf course would have harmed local wetlands and wildlife.

Exhausted by the jousting, Pacific New Wave sold out to Orinda Gateway LLC in 1996, which assumed responsibility for the Development Agreement with the city. Eventually that group's name would become OG Property Owners, LLC. A further decade of dueling ensued until both sides finally compromised in 2004. Two hundred and forty-five single-family residences would still be built, but only on 215 acres. The remaining two square miles would be golf course-free, preserved as open space - significant chunks of which would be owned by the East Bay Regional Park District and East Bay Municipal Utility District.

Unfortunately for OG Property Owners, America's Great Recession stalled the project once again. Since 2005, the city ended up amending the original development agreement four times, adjusting timelines for the construction of playfields, installation of irrigation systems, planting of trees and other site improvements. It wasn't until just a few short weeks ago - at a recent Orinda City Council meeting - that council members and residents received word that OG Property Owners and Wilder had finally turned the corner.

Seven homes now dot Wilder's hills. Five are officially being called home sweet home by new Orindans, one continues to be utilized as a sales office, and the owners of the seventh are expected to move in shortly. Five more are under construction as another 20 make their way through design and permitting. Toll Brothers has also acquired interest in 25 other lots, Taylor Morrison has inked a Purchase and Sale Agreement with OG Property Owners for another 25, and Shapell Homes, Inc. has secured building permits for five more.

Scott Goldie, of OG Property Owners, presented those statistics May 6 as part of his company's annual status report to the City Council as mandated by state law. The public hearing assessed whether or not the firm remains in good faith compliance with the terms of the development agreement. As in previous years, staff found that OG Property Owners had fallen short on several conditions while doing well with others.

Of particular concern, the developer failed to pay the Moraga-Orinda Fire District \$2,000 per dwelling unit prior to the issuance of building permits as required by the development agreement. However, the company did pony up \$180,000 to purchase an equipped ambulance and recently also established a \$20,000 fund to cover developer-related requests to expedite MOFD site inspections at Wilder.

Council members were also asked to consider several potential amendments to the development agreement, including defining completion dates for the Edgewood Emergency Vehicle Access and parking by mid-October, converting rear slope landscaping to a phased plan, and the possible relocation of Wilder's Art and Garden Center from its initial planned location at the southern end of the Wilder site to an area between the fourth and fifth playfields.

In general, city leaders were pleased but declined to take action regarding the art center, instead directing staff to bring the item back for future discussion. The City Council then found that OG Property Owners was in substantial compliance with the development agreement. The company will return at a later date with defined details regarding the timing of trail openings and will work with staff to schedule a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new Wilder playfields.

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