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All Who Love Orinda Urged to Attend Housing Element Workshop

By Laurie Snyder

"It's all about the public process," says Christina Ratcliffe of the city's upcoming Housing Element Planning Workshop. A senior planner with the City of Orinda, Ratcliffe is hoping residents, business owners, church members, teachers, and others who care about the community will turn out in droves to learn more about a vital part of the city's General Plan, share their views on housing needs, and tell city leaders what to do about those needs. "We want to get as many different folks in Orinda who are here and enjoy Orinda and love it to tell us what types of housing they want to see, what direction they want the community to go."

Slated to begin at 6 p.m. on June 26 in the Orinda Library Auditorium, the workshop will be the first of several opportunities to weigh in, and will include a presentation by representatives from Pacific Municipal Consultants, the firm helping to guide Orinda through the state-required process in which California communities must address their projected housing needs. PMC consultants will explain what the housing element is, what is required of the city by the state, and the scope of the Environmental Impact Report required for the element's fifth cycle.

Attendees will then move to breakout tables at which PMC and city staff will answer questions and take suggestions. "People can go around and visit at their own pace so that everybody can get all the information and give us input," explains Ratcliffe. Comment cards and an email address will be provided for residents who feel awkward about speaking up in public. "We want to encourage people to participate in any way that's comfortable for them to do so."

As for the Environmental Impact Report, she explains that it's part of the California Environmental Quality Act - more commonly referred to as CEQA. In addition to being required, it's a good thing. "The main idea behind it is let's evaluate everything so we know what we're getting into. I think that's a very responsible thing to do." The city will look at and evaluate the possible impacts of the element to the fullest extent possible, and then make an informed decision about how best to proceed.

Acknowledging that many find general plan minutiae about as exciting as watching paint dry, Ratcliffe turns serious. "It's not just housing. It helps shape the community, the form of the community, the dynamic of the community. It's also a legal requirement. Having a certified housing element makes us eligible to apply for grants."

A second, follow-up workshop will be held at a later date, as will public hearings as the element and EIR work their way through their respective drafting and review processes. "We were given very clear direction by the council to reach out," adds Ratcliffe. "We want everyone to feel that they are part of the community and that they are being heard."

So tell your neighbors, and get there early. The city is planning for an overflow crowd with sound piped out to latecomers seated in the Library Gallery. For details, call or email Ratcliffe: (925) 253-4213 or cratcliffe@cityoforinda.org.

Orinda Housing Element Workshop

When: Thursday, June 26 at 6 p.m.

Where: Orinda Library Auditorium, 26 Orinda Way

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

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