

Published September 9th, 2015

Planning Commission Nixes Plan for Chase Bank Branch

By Victor Ryerson



Zamboni's Pizza owner Ali Aboutalebi would like to stay at the 1 Camino Sobrante location until he retires. Photo Ohlen Alexander

The Orinda Planning Commission has denied an application to establish a branch office of Chase Bank at the site currently occupied by FedEx/ Kinko's and Zamboni's Pizza at 1 Camino Sobrante. The Aug. 25 decision was unanimous, and followed public comment overwhelmingly opposed to replacement of the existing retail businesses at the location by a bank.

Approval of the proposal would have required the commission to grant a commercial use permit for the bank, because it is a financial institution, a "Class B" use under Orinda's zoning law, rather than an automatically permissible "Class A" use, such as a retail shop or restaurant. The requirement is a reflection of the preference for Class A uses in a Downtown Commercial (DC) district in the city's zoning law and General Plan. The request also would have required the commission to grant a variance, because the number of proposed parking spaces at the site is less than that required under Orinda's zoning law.

Chase Bank proposed to convert the two existing retail spaces into a 2,917-square-foot branch office staffed by four full-time employees. The proposed branch would have two teller windows and offer retail banking services comparable to those offered by seven other branch banks in Orinda, as well as one interior and two exterior ATMs. Chase sought to establish the branch because it has 1,200 customers in Orinda, and its nearest branch is in Lafayette.

Under Orinda's zoning law, the commission has the discretion to grant or deny the commercial use permit, and it scrutinized the proposal closely in a public hearing that lasted well over one hour. Various provisions of Orinda's municipal law and General Plan provided guidance for the commissioners, who also heard more than 40 minutes of comments from members of the public. The issues that proved most compelling were the bank's inconsistency with the preference for pedestrian-friendly, non-office uses in the DC district, and the absence - documented by a public survey - of residents' desire for more retail banking in the city. (Restaurants are the number one choice.) The commissioners were also concerned that the bank would not generate sales tax revenues.

Although the commissioners' denial of the commercial use permit made the issue of the variance for the parking requirement moot, the commission nonetheless made findings necessary to deny the variance as well, so the entire matter may be appealed to the Orinda City Council. The bank office would require 26 spaces in conjunction with its own use, and a total of 125 spaces would be required for all of the tenants in the building under current law if the application were approved; currently, there are 28 spaces for all of the building's tenants. The commission determined that the special circumstances required for granting the variance do not exist. As one public speaker observed, "parking is a disaster already" at the building.

Perhaps the most eloquent summary of the basis for the decision was made by another public speaker. "What I actually need is a good pizza place," he said, and not another bank.

Reach the reporter at: victor@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA