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Planning commission rejects bid for historic landmark designation, applicants appeal



Fully glazed window walls at the southwest corner, looking southeast.

By Sora O'Doherty

The decision on whether or not the residence at 12 Charles Hill Circle deserves to be designated as a historic landmark will now rest with the Orinda City Council, following the decision of the planning commission not to recommend to the city council that the designation be granted. The commission chose not to follow the recommendation of the Historical Landmarks Committee, which had voted to recommend the historic landmark

designation. The planning commission action on the residence was considered at its July 21 meeting, and finalized at a subsequent meeting on July 27. Following the filing of an appeal by the applicants, Jeanne Huang Li and Nathan Ogle, the matter will be considered by the city council.

The applicants seek the historic landmark designation for the residence that was built in 1951 by architect Paul Hamilton, who lived in the home and ran his business from it until 1961. The applicants claimed that

Hamilton was an architect of local significance and that the home is a well-preserved example of the Second Bay Tradition, and Orinda staff and the Historic Landmarks Committee agreed. However, the planning commission struggled to find that Hamilton was significant, finding that he only worked on five homes in Orinda, and that none of the homes he had designed anywhere had been given historic landmark recognition. The commissioners also questioned the timing of the application, wondering why the applicant brought it forward when the home is still in need of repairs.

In order to be designated as an historic landmark, a property must meet at least three conditions set forth in the city code. The planning commission found that 12 Charles Hill Circle met only one condition, and therefore did not qualify for historic landmark status. The sole condition that the commission found applicable was that the building contains elements of architectural design, detail and materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant architec-

tural innovation.

The applicants had also advanced the work of renown landscape architect Lawrence Halprin on the property, but the commissioners considered that his contribution had not been significant and that much of the landscaping was no longer present.

At the hearing before the HLC, neighbors of the applicants argued that the applicants were trying to prevent them from completing restoration of their properties on the grounds that it would affect the historic status of the applicants' home. Although staff did not dispute that the applicants had made that effort, they did repeatedly note that the historic designation would have applied solely to the applicant's property, and that it would not have influenced decisions on the neighbor's property. However, there is an outstanding issue of whether or not the applicants could force their neighbors to be subjected to more costly procedures for environmental impact reports under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

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Once dubious, Wilder residents now wildly enthusiastic about preschool

By Sora O'Doherty

When somewhat over one year ago it was proposed to rent a portion of the Art & Garden Center at Wilder to a Montessori preschool, Wilder residents expressed concerns that this was another benefit for Orinda that would be a burden on the Wilder community. During an annual review by the Orinda planning commission on July 27, there was no word of opposition, only extremely happy Wilder residents saying that

the applicant, Jatinder Kaur of Montessori Impressions Academy has changed their lives for the better.

The preschool was approved in 2020 to operate in Studio 4 at the Art & Garden Center at Wilder, offering preschool education and daycare for 30 children, aged 2 to 6, Mondays through Fridays, year round, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. The school was authorized to also use the public bathroom and the children's playground. The applicant is required to pack up everything every day, so that the facility is available for other uses in the evenings and on the weekends.

The applicant came before the planning commission at the first annual review to ask that the use permit for the school at 20 Orinda Fields (the Art & Garden Center) be approved permanently and that the requirement for annual reviews be dropped. In addition, Kaur sought to open an annex at The Ranch House, 10 Orinda Fields, to accommodate another 10 children. Both properties are owned by the city of Orinda and rented out.

Senior Planner Adam Foster presented the matter to the planning commission, along with Director of Planning Drummond Buckley. Given that the previous hearing on approval of the use permit for the Montessori school had met with considerable concern from Wilder residents, commissioner Brandyn Iverson asked if the city had received any opposition to the current application. Foster stated that they had not, and in fact had only received statements of support.

Buckley added that Parks and Recreation Director Todd Trimble had not received any complaints during the time that the preschool has been operative. There has been no difficulty with students being dropped off and picked up at Wilder Fields. There was a single complaint about a parent parking by the mail kiosks and walking a student to the school, but it turned



Photo Sora O'Doherty

out to be a one-off incident and the complaint was withdrawn, with the complainant noting that the school had been very responsive and a very good neighbor. Staff also reported that there has thus far been no conflict with users of the Art & Garden Center or the playfields, although it was noted that the school has thus far been operating during a pandemic year and demand for the facilities has not been high.

Kaur stated that she brought the application because the school has been tremendously successful and that she has a waiting list for placement up to two years out and that places at the school are in high demand.

Although there was no opposition to the application, speaker after speaker gave the school glowing reviews. Wilder resident Karen Do said, "My 3-year-old daughter has been a student for eight months, and she has blossomed."

Do said she was excited to find quality daycare right in her neighborhood and testified that Montessori Impressions provides education that contributes to kind next generation members of our community. Before her daughter was a student, she enjoyed co-sharing the play space, a question that had been raised by commissioner Iverson. Other parents echoed this sentiment, stating that they had used the playground before their children were enrolled and found the experience of interacting with the school children and teachers to be very beneficial.

All of the speakers were Wilder residents. Nisha Taparia called the school "a real blessing." Another speaker said, "I cannot tell you how excited we are to find quality childcare right in our neighborhood."

... continued on next Page

NOMINATIONS NOW OPEN for the ORINDA CITIZEN of the YEAR 2020

Do you have a person in mind to nominate for outstanding community service in 2020 and/or over many years of lifetime service?

- Must be a current Orinda resident
- Must be someone who has given of their time, talents and energy as a community volunteer helping make Orinda better, where people want to live, work and shop
- Must be someone who models excellence and good citizenship in everything they do
- Must be someone who brings our community together making us proud and promoting community spirit

A celebration dinner will be held on Sunday evening, October 24, 2021 at the Orinda Wilder Art and Garden Center to honor the award recipient. The deadline for submitting nominations is by Friday, September 3.

Nominations can be sent to orindafoundation@gmail.com or mailed to Orinda Community Foundation, PO Box 21, Orinda CA 94563. Include your name and contact, along with the name and contact for the nominee.



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City Council Regular Meeting:

Tuesday, Sept. 7, 7 p.m.
By Teleconference Only
Planning Commission
Tuesday, Aug. 10, 7 p.m.
By Teleconference Only

Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission

Wednesday, Aug. 11, 6:30 p.m.
By Teleconference Only