

Orinda News

Published February 1st, 2018

What's wrong with a plan?

Change will inevitably come to downtown (and frankly, I wish it would). We can't avoid it by sticking with an outdated, boilerplate general plan from the 80's and simply shrugging our shoulders. We citizens have it within our power to affect change in a positive way by participating in a thoughtful planning process.

We must also recognize the recent shift in state policy which is increasing pressure on transit-rich cities like ours to address the current housing shortage. We only have a few years until Orinda must certify another state-required housing element (which details where and how Orinda plans to accommodate future housing growth to meet regional targets). Meanwhile, the state is taking more aggressive steps to monitor our progress under the existing housing element and introducing bills to override local zoning restrictions near transit. The City Council will likely have to consider the possibility of encouraging more housing within our downtown. Why wait until the last minute to start this process? Or worse, why let the state do it for us without our input?

Planning is good. The city council should not avoid or delay the process of downtown planning. Following the thorough assessments of our downtown made by Urban Land Institute and Main Street USA, city staff recommended creating a Streetscape Master Plan. After hearing the inspiring ideas of the two professional panels, this is a very timid step toward progress that doesn't address the real issues of our downtown. A streetscape plan deals in sidewalks and benches, not in the fundamental framework of what we want development in our downtown to look like. Alternatively, a downtown-specific plan could outline preferred building styles, incentivize development to utilize the creek downtown, improve the flow of parking, create community gathering spaces, draw in desired tenants, and so on. But the City Council has not started work on a downtown plan.

I want a better downtown right now so that my family and I can begin enjoying it. But the first step is for our local elected leaders to let us determine as a community what we want and then make a plan to achieve it. There are strong voices against doing anything, but I urge the City Council to listen to the rest of us who are disappointed with the state of our downtown and who want to start with a plan as soon as possible. Let's go!

- Arran Schultz