

# City Supports Downtown Orinda Renewal

Orinda is in close proximity to many vibrant communities, but many Orinda residents feel that their city's vivacity is lagging behind.

Orinda City Councilwoman Darlene Gee champions this sentiment. "There are quite a large number of residents that would like to see more options," Gee said. "They routinely utilize lots of services, restaurants and shopping in neighboring communities and a large number of them would [prefer] a more vibrant downtown Orinda."

There has been debate as to whether the city government should invite and pay for panels of professional architects and developers in order to have expert input in the process of reviving the downtown. That debate ended at a recent city council meeting, when four of the five council members voted to engage both the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and Mainstreet America (MSA), which will cost the city a total of \$36,000. Orinda Vice Mayor and City Councilwoman Eve Phillips voted against the measure, as she seemed concerned about potential conflicts of interest and the motivation of the panel members. "I think bringing in consultants like ULI, especially one driven by the building trades including engineering, architecture, and development firms, will only create more division in our community," Phillips said in an email. Councilwoman Gee, however, believes that the city council needs to strike a balance. "We want professional expertise—that is very important," Gee said. "On the other hand, we clearly want our own community to define its future. We want to do what the community wants to do."

What's Up Downtown Orinda (WUDO), a group of interested Orinda residents, is working to drive change and further discussion

on the renovation of downtown Orinda. Its members have attended city council meetings and pushed for change over the past year. Hillary Murphy, a member of the WUDO steering committee, made it clear that WUDO is not waiting around. "When we find ways we feel we can move things forward, we act," Murphy said. "For example, we were active supporters of two pro-downtown renewal candidates for Orinda City Council: Darlene Gee and Inga Miller, and we lent our support to help get them elected. We are also doing our part to support the businesses that are already here."

Gee has no issue with the group, even praising their ability to start a conversation. "I think that it has been a very good voice for raising the issue and asking the council and community to consider changes," Gee said. "They are a reflection of changing demographics in the community, and they've raised good questions and started a good conversation."

Phillips isn't convinced that the solution lies in the General Plan, however. "It's not at all clear to me that our plan is the problem, so I don't know that we would need to change our plan to drive downtown change," Phillips said. "I think a concerted effort to work with property owners and potential businesses could help drive the changes that our residents want to see."

Prior to last month's City Council election, there was a discrepancy between the four candidates on the amendment to Orinda's General Plan. After being elected to a four-year term, Gee believes that the council should keep an open mind. "I'm open to looking at some flexibility," Gee said. "I think a small portion of this community has been so vocal about not [amending the General Plan] that they've kept the process at bay for a long time, and I think it's time to take a look at it."