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Problems with your Government?

By Nick Marnell

Many who witnessed the mudslinging and the negative advertising before the election have little interest in running for elective office. But winning an election is not the only method by which citizens can participate in local government. In fact, membership on appointed civic commissions and committees sometimes allows for even more influence on the creation of public policy. That is why Contra Costa County and the Lamorinda municipalities rigorously vet those who apply for these appointed posts. Roughly speaking, a commission has powers delegated to it and is assigned a specific task to perform, while a committee is typically a deliberative body that investigates and advises on a specific issue.

For filling Lamorinda positions, the work begins in the office of the city or town clerk, who announces the vacancies, collects the applications and agendas the candidate interviews. Moraga and Orinda council members hold the interviews during full council sessions, while city clerk Joanne Robbins confirmed that the Lafayette interviews are conducted by the city council liaisons and the commission chair. "By having the commission chair participate, we have input from a person who has the best understanding of what additional skills are required on the commission," said Lafayette mayor Don Tatzin. He stressed that the commission meetings are public meetings and anyone can attend. In all cases, the city or town council appoints the positions at a public meeting.

In Contra Costa County, the clerk of the board posts vacancies, collects the applications and forwards them to the appropriate county staff person and the district supervisor. Depending on the position, interviews are conducted by the supervisor or by the county Internal Operations Committee. Erling Horn talked about his experience securing the District 2 alternate seat on the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District advisory fire commission.

"Make your resume as short as possible," said Horn. "And be prepared to be flexible." Horn applied for a seat on the county planning commission, but during the vetting process, Supervisor Candace Andersen suggested that Horn, who helped write fire standards for the National Fire Protection Agency, might be a fit for the advisory fire commission. He then interviewed with Andersen for an hour.

Andersen, whose district includes Lamorinda, explained what she covers in her candidate interviews. "I want to know how often they've been to community meetings," she said. "I evaluate their expertise, their education, their volunteer experience. I explain the frustrations of working on public boards. And of course, we do a thorough check of their background and their character references." Ten days after his interview, Horn learned that Andersen recommended him for the fire position to the Board of Supervisors, which officially appointed him at a public meeting.

One aspect of public service that terrifies many potential applicants is the financial disclosure requirement. Most appointees must fill out the California Fair Political Practice Commission Form 700 Statement of Economic Interests, a full disclosure of personal assets and income. The form includes a cover letter and six financial schedules, with the degree of disclosure set by the municipality's conflict of interest code. Lafayette posts the completed forms on its website, town clerk Marty McInturf confirmed that Moraga posts them on the FPPC website, while Orinda retains its forms in-house, available for public inspection, per city clerk Michele Olsen. The county also posts required Form 700s on the FPPC website.

In addition, many local and county appointees must complete courses in both California ethics and the Brown Act, which guarantees the public's right to attend and participate in public meetings. Committee-specific experience is not a prerequisite for serving. Jim Cunha, a member of the Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force, had no background in fire or emergency medical service, but he brought along his experience as a trustee and executive committee member of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation. His curiosity over the complexities of the fire service drove him to investigate its problems.

"If you don't understand something, then it's not right," said Cunha. "Keep digging, keep asking

questions until you do understand it. More times than not, it needs fixing."

"I encourage people to apply," said Horn. "There's a real need for citizen involvement." He certainly knows of what he speaks, as Horn is active on three Lafayette public committees. "Yeah, I'm probably at the upper end," he said, noting that most citizens manage participation in only one. And though at times it may not appear to be so, citizens under the age of 30 are strongly urged to apply for all government appointed positions. "Because many of the meetings are held in the evenings, it should be relatively convenient for working individuals to make time in their schedules," said Orinda city manager Janet Keeter.

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