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New council member Kosla brings development experience to the table

By Sora O'Doherty



Council Member Nick Kosla Photo Sora O'Doherty

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Although there have been a lot of negative comments about developers during the current attempt by Orinda to update its downtown, Nick Kosla was very open during his campaign about his experience in development and with developers. He believes that his message resonated with the electorate, which chose him over former council member Eve Phillips, who often expressed doubts about developers during the process of working with the Urban Land Institute and Mainstreet America on the city's streetscape project. Kosla holds a master's in public policy and administration, land use policy.

Kosla said that during the campaign, he often heard, "Nick, our downtown needs a lot of help, not just a little help. It seems like in some of the other communities their property values are going up because the downtowns are thriving." Kosla's priorities are to take advantage of San Pablo Creek, which he sees as a huge amenity. He wonders, "Can we open it up?" He wants to get more retail in downtown, but to focus on Orinda for Orindans. "If you have the right type of development you can get people out there," he believes.

Growing up in Orinda, Kosla always loved the creeks; he loves to fly fish. He wants the creek to be

more accessible for people to walk by, for children to learn from. "Most of what I've worked on are very large, complicated projects, he says, such as Oak Knoll in the Oakland Hills. He also worked on the redevelopment of the Alameda air base and has experience working with the Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife. He is excited to bring his expertise to the city council.

"I feel like our real estate values could be higher than they are," he says. "Lafayette has four grocery stores, including Whole Foods and Diablo Foods, and now has Philz coffee. People aren't willing to pay more for the amenities we have," he adds. Kosla said that he has been told that last year housing prices in Lafayette exceeded those in Orinda, and that this trend is continuing. When people move to Lamorinda, he says, they choose Lafayette because it has more amenities, a more vibrant downtown, and they are willing to pay more for that. While he doesn't want Orinda to become Lafayette, and he doesn't believe that Orinda could ever support four groceries, he thinks that there is a happy medium which will bring about a locally sustainable economic engine, and see a revitalization of downtown Orinda. In turn, he says, that will raise real estate values.

He also points out that people in Lafayette are beginning to move, to downsize. "It would be great," he says, "if people in Orinda could also downsize but stay in Orinda." Currently, there are not a lot of options, in his opinion. He points to Orindawoods, which has some smaller houses.

Also high on Kosla's agenda this coming year is the issue of fire safety, which he feels personally as he lives with his family high in the Orinda hills. He is interested in exploring ways to allow Orindans to evacuate in the event of wild fire, such as installing combination locks on existing fire gates.

Kosla's and his wife Larissa have two daughters. The younger one, Grace, is at Wagner Ranch in third grade and her older sister, Audrey, is in sixth grade at Orinda Intermediate School.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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