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Experienced team moves forward with Orinda governance

By Sora O'Doherty



Amy Worth takes the helm of Orinda as mayor for the fifth time. Photo Sora O'Doherty

Mayor Amy Worth commenced her fifth term as mayor of Orinda in 2020, assisted by Vice Mayor Dennis Fay. Fay is new to the city council, but served for many years on the recently disbanded Citizen's Infrastructure Oversight Commission, including as chair of the CIOC. Serving on the CIOC since its inception was where he met city council member Darlene Gee, also a transportation engineer like Fay, who just completed her term as mayor.

Both Worth and Fay have priorities that they would like to accomplish in the coming year, and both agree that the most pressing problem Orinda faces is the threat of wildfire. Although 2020 will primarily be remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a year that really honed the community's priorities for the coming year, Worth said, and mitigating the risk of wildfire is uppermost in the minds of residents. Worth emphasizes that the city must operate in a fiscally responsible way, and cannot

have a deficit. The new oversight commission, provisionally titled the Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission, will be tasked with developing programs for wildfire safety, as well as continuing the work on Orinda's roads and drains, which Worth said is a "forever problem, given the terrain we have in Orinda, mainly clay soil that contracts and expands."

Fay emphasized that Orinda isn't changing anything, but is adding something new to what the city council has to deal with. Most important, he said, is implementing Measure R, the new sales tax approved by Orinda voters in the November general election. "The thing we really need to do," Fay said, "is get as quickly as possible into the wildfire aspects, starting with expanding the chipper program. Next, we need to fill out the commission," he continued, whose first chore will be to develop a wildfire protection plan that prioritizes how to spend the revenue from the new tax. "MOFD has a general plan," Fay said, "which is a very good starting point to figure out what things might be productive, and prioritize those things." He also wants the commission to explore other things, for example, the use of technology, and for the city to partner with the county to think about wildfire fuels in the unincorporated areas of Contra Costa County that surround Orinda.

Next in priority, according to Fay, is tackling critical public drains that need to be repaired so Orinda doesn't have another Miner Road sinkhole situation. Fay explained that the public roads are now fixed, and, in his opinion, there is sufficient other revenue to maintain them, including revenue from the gas tax and garbage truck impact fees. He imagines that spending Measure R funds on road upkeep will become necessary in about 10 years.

Both Worth and Fay agreed that the next priority is completing the downtown Orinda planning process. Worth said, this is a really good time to be working on the downtown. During the pandemic, she said, "people feel safe in their local communities, they want to be in their downtown." Worth did all her holiday shopping in Orinda. She emphasized how important it is for the community to support local businesses and restaurants. She urged residents to use this time to go through their wardrobes, and bring items to the dry cleaners in town who are suffering badly during the pandemic. She also talked about fundraisers by the Rotary, Miramonte High School and other groups that feature drive-through takeout dinners. Fay explained that once the downtown plan is finished, the city council will have to take certain actions to implement it, such as amending the general plan and updating zoning. Fay added that although the county health department has the most important role in controlling COVID-19, the city had to deal with how the pandemic affects the city's revenues, which caused the city to have to lay off staff. He noted that the pandemic affected residents and local businesses, such as the Orinda Theatre. He would like to promote individual actions to keep core things going in Orinda, such as purchasing takeout meals from local restaurants.

Both the new mayor and new vice mayor also expressed the need for greater efforts to promote diversity and prevent discrimination in Orinda. Fay said that he was looking forward to the mayor appointing people to serve on a police oversight commission. Worth is one of two city council members who meet regularly with the Orinda Union School District board as part of a subcommittee designed to strengthen the ways in which both organizations can foster those goals.

Both Worth and Fay spoke about how the city had quickly pivoted to virtual business at the beginning of the

pandemic, and Worth was pleased with how the public participated in virtual city council meetings, as well as how well the cities that make up Lamorinda work together.

Fay has two years remaining on his term and is happy to talk to anyone who wants to talk to him. He invites people to call (his phone number is on the Orinda website) or email, and promises that if an email is directed to him, as opposed to the entire city council, he will answer it personally.

Worth, whose term also ends in December 2022, was first elected to the city council in 1998, and has now served for over two decades. Former mayors Darlene Gee and Inga Miller were both reelected in November, and the remaining council member, Nick Kosla's term also expires at the end of 2022.

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