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Letters to the editor

What shall Orinda become?

The Orinda city council wants to "revitalize" downtown (theater + village). Many residents have said they want to retain the village character and would like downtown to be nicer. City consultants have said that for this to occur buildings would have to have shopping and four floors of residences above. The Downtown Precise Plan anticipates 55'-75' high buildings.

The state requires "in-fill" housing at all income levels: very low, low, moderate and above moderate. It mandates that there must be no city imposed obstacles that prevent building 1359 new units in Orinda. It requires a "plan", called the Housing Element (HE) that demonstrates how Orinda could satisfy this requirement over the next decade. The HE must include an inventory of the sites and, based on zoning, what income level housing could be built. The HE must also demonstrate that there are no safety or environmental issues that would preclude this. The state has also said that no parking will be required for development within a half mile of public transit.

The city council may yet enable developers to tear down extant buildings, displacing our beloved businesses, and replace them with tall "mixed use" buildings that will turn our narrow streets into canyons. The planning department is telling the council that most of downtown must be zoned for "mixed use", high density, tall buildings, thus satisfying the council's desire for revitalization.

The unfortunate economic reality is that Orinda cannot attract retail businesses, not because of city regulations, but because of our limited foot traffic and because of intense competition in adjacent shopping areas. Even increasing our population by several thousand will not cause businesses to come here, especially with reduced parking. It is a fantasy to imagine new boutique stores or restaurants springing up in Orinda. There will inevitably be empty storefronts in any new "mixed use" buildings without sufficient parking.

Yes, we need to create more affordable housing for more families and individuals. Yes, downtown needs to look better. This can be achieved by having the city create a "facade fund" and by placing good artwork in key locations.

Orinda is a residential town with an appropriate amount of retail and should not aspire to become like Lafayette or Walnut Creek. We should do what we do best. Retain a quiet friendly village character with nice views of the hills and great schools.

Charles Porges
Orinda

It's Time for Orinda to Abandon the DPP

It's time for Orinda to abandon the Downtown Precise Plan, and to put on hold plans to "revitalize" downtown. There really isn't anything wrong with downtown. Yes, the buildings are old, but they are functional, and there is lots of parking (especially in the Village). There are very few vacancies. The businesses are service businesses that serve the residents; just what a small town needs. There is no reasonable basis for believing that a redeveloped downtown would be better than what we now have. It is more likely to be worse: more crowded; less parking; more traffic; more vacancies; less retail. The appearance of downtown could be spruced up with some landscaping and a facade improvement program.

The failure of any development whatsoever at 25A Orinda Way, across from the Library, despite full approvals, speaks volumes. Orinda isn't going to attract the high-end restaurants, speciality shops, and boutiques that some seem to want. Greater retail variety, and fancier restaurants, are nearby; they don't need to be physically located in "Orinda." Many Orinda residents live closer to downtown

Lafayette than to downtown Orinda.

The notion that downsizing seniors who want to stay in Orinda will be accommodated is false. Given that the market favors construction of rental units over for sale units, there will be few units that seniors can purchase in order to downsize. They will be forced to rent if they wish to remain in Orinda. A senior selling a house that has been owned for decades, who becomes a renter, will also incur a substantial capital gains tax.

Finally, we should be loyal to, and have empathy for, the local small business owners and their employees, who have served us well for decades. Destroying the buildings they occupy will destroy their livelihoods. You cannot feasibly relocate restaurants or many of the other businesses. And the owners of new buildings will charge unaffordable higher rents due to acquisition and construction costs and property taxes.

The DPP should be abandoned.

Nick Waranoff

Orinda

Vice Mayor Steve Woehleke denied as next Moraga mayor

In a 3-2 vote the Moraga Town Council defied a 47 year old tradition and denied Steve Woehleke as the next Mayor. This tradition was rarely violated in 47 years and has served the Town well avoiding conflict.

Renata Sos, Teresa Onoda and new Sona Makker voted against Steve, tossing aside the tradition calling for Woehleke as Mayor in 2022 and Sos as Mayor in 2023.

This was Makker's second regular Council meeting and she chose not to follow the Town's tradition. Makker was elected as Vice Mayor.

This self serving action by Sos and Onoda is an outrageous affront to Town tradition and to an eminently qualified Moraga leader and outstanding colleague.

Sos'/Onoda's rationale was a weak, "it's an important year, a better Presiding Officer". Steve has 18 years of town government experience to Sos' 5 years.

This isn't the first time Sos defied tradition for her own self interest. In December 2019, Sos attempted to bypass tradition by accepting the nomination of Vice Mayor and only withdrawing after negative feedback.

Mike McCluer

Moraga

Town Mayor election protocol

Recent criticism of the Moraga Town Council's appointment of Renata Sos as the new Mayor warrants a factual review of the relevant sentences in the Town Council's adopted protocol 3.1 (from the Town's website).

"The election or removal of the Mayor or Vice Mayor requires at least three (3) affirmative votes.. The Town Council is encouraged to rotate the offices of Mayor and Vice Mayor amongst the members of the Council according to their order of seniority (considering only the Town's two most recent election cycles) as appropriate."

Thus, a majority of the members of the Council are supposed to elect whomever they believe is most suited to the job and are explicitly encouraged to consider seniority in that decision. Sos is currently the most senior member of the Council having served more than 3 years.

This time, a majority of the Council considered her to be the best choice to be Mayor for the coming year. They are obligated to act in accordance with what they believe is in the best interest of the Town. Sos has proven herself to be an effective leader who has served Moraga with intelligence, maturity, and dedication. Her appointment as Mayor is good news for Moraga.

Maridel Moulton

Moraga

Mayor election discussion

In a remarkable display of hubris, on Dec. 8, 2021, at the Moraga Town Council meeting, Council member Sos declared herself to be an extraordinary leader, with leadership skills superior to those of Council member Woehleke. In light of prior Council practice where the Vice-Mayor becomes the next Mayor, I found it very surprising that Council member Onoda nominated Sos to be Mayor and that the newly sworn-in Council member Makker then announced that she had questions for the two candidates.

The three elected Sos the Mayor, defying more than 40 years of practice to bypass Council Member Woehleke, who is perfectly capable to be Mayor. In my opinion, this was a serious lapse of judgment by all three, as witnessed by the firestorm of objections filed by more than 100 community members on Nextdoor Neighbor within little more than a day. Those objections reflected serious concerns about the integrity of Sos and the others, and whether the Council under their control could be trusted. While some called for a recall election, the recall process is long, expensive and inevitably divisive.

With the passage of time, I am hopeful that everyone, and especially Sos, can step back and consider a fresh start. The Town is a human enterprise. People in charge of human enterprises sometimes make mistakes. In my opinion, a series of mistakes were made resulting in a bad outcome, not just for Woehleke but for the Town.

Sos claims to be a good leader. Good leaders who make mistakes swallow their pride and try to correct their mistakes. I hope that Sos is a good leader who understands that she has made a mistake - a mistake that has harmed the trust that the community should have in the Town Council. This situation is not irretrievable. There is a simple correction: hold a new election for Mayor, appoint Woehleke as Mayor and Sos as Vice Mayor. Sos can take her turn as Mayor in 2023, under the normal practice. Some resentments may remain, but the health of the enterprise should take precedence over resentments. Hopefully, she sees that this would be true leadership - an act to be taken without feeling any embarrassment.

Fred Weil
Moraga

Woehleke support

I want Steve Woehleke to be the next Mayor of Moraga. His qualifications are obvious. Having lived in Moraga since 1975, I've always tried to find at least one council member that I felt comfortable communicating with and recently Steve has been one of those. I ask questions, make suggestions, and sometimes even complain. Steve always gives me a straight forward honest answer and will do his best to solve any problems I have.

Pete Williams
Moraga

More Moraga mayor decision-making process

After the Moraga Town Council meeting of Dec. 8, 2021, several people posted critical comments on Next Door regarding the selection of Renata Sos as Moraga's next mayor. First, some people claimed that Steve Woehleke was entitled to be the mayor because of a tradition of choosing the person who had the most votes at the second to the last election. This is a democracy, not a monarchy. The Town's protocol "encourages" a rotation of positions according to Council members' seniority. Putting aside who is best for the job, Ms. Sos is the longest serving Councilmember, having been appointed to the Council before Mr. Woehleke was elected.

Second, some people claimed that Ms. Sos, Ms. Onoda, and Ms. Makker violated the Brown Act before the Council meeting. No one has presented any evidence to support the claim. The allegation is defamatory because violations of the Brown Act can be punished criminally. Those who made the accusation ought to withdraw it publicly.

For those who have questions about the decision-making process, I suggest you watch the last hour of the Dec. 8 council meeting online. Ms. Sos's tone, intelligence, and explanation for why she believed herself to be the best choice were impressive. On the other hand, Mr. Woehleke attacked Ms. Onoda and Ms. Sos personally, claiming they should "apologize" for their votes on a proposed project that was rejected 4-1, with Mr. Woehleke the sole dissenter. In supporting Mr. Woehleke, Mr. McCluer did not identify qualities that made Mr. Woehleke a good choice, but instead improperly suggested Ms. Sos bore some responsibility for an embezzlement at the Moraga Community Foundation. There are no credible accusations that people other than Bob Fritzky were at fault for the embezzlement. To suggest otherwise is irresponsible. In the end, Mr. Woehleke revealed himself as resentful and inclined to ad hominem attacks, and as someone who personalizes political decisions and carries grudges when his views are not accepted by others. He is not the best person to be mayor.
David W. Shapiro
Moraga

Moraga's ruling oligarchy

I communicate this view as an individual, not representing the town of Moraga. The Moraga Town Council has a long-standing tradition and protocol of selecting Mayor for each one-year term based on a set of election criteria, not personal preference. Not only does this tradition recognize that each Town Council member is there to represent all citizens of Moraga, it helps prevent ruling "power blocks". On December 8, 2021, three members of the Town Council ignored the tradition without cause (see video recording at Moraga web site). Not only did this vote break Moraga's tradition and create a very poor tone for 2022, it likely formalized Moraga's ruling oligarchy, an oligarchy not necessarily representing all of Moraga's citizens without bias. The door is now open for future abuses. I encourage Moraga citizens to practice the basic form of democracy and make your voices heard. Petition the Town Council by letters and verbally during Council meetings, run for office, and ensure you vote for candidates who will represent the best interests of all Moraga citizens.
Steve Woehleke
Moraga

Dysfunctional council

When Renata Sos was appointed to the Moraga Town Council in 2018 and Mike McCluer and Steve Woehleke were elected in the subsequent election, I thought Moraga had finally entered something resembling the Age of Enlightenment. I have learned in the last week that this was another illusionary dream. So now, instead of fixing roads, drains and property issues, Moraga will once again have to deal with another dysfunctional Council. Congratulations to all the puppeteers who created this! I hope you know who you are. I wish I did!
Caroline Wood
Moraga

Time to move on

I'm chagrined and personally disappointed to see all the caustic vitriol arising from Renata Sos becoming Moraga's newest Mayor. Let's put this whole matter in its proper context. Moraga is a very small town. At last count, with just over 18,000 residents. Unfortunately, like the rest of the country, we're also part of a very troubled world that's dealing with critical challenges from a worsening climate, domestic and international political unrest and growing crime. In that context, it strikes me that we might be putting the "emphasis on the wrong syllable" (i.e. how can the simple ascension to Mayor of a small town generate so

much anger and so many false accusations??).

I had an opportunity to work with Renata during the Town's successful campaign to install surveillance cameras. I've since grown to admire her professionalism, integrity and commitment to our Town.

She enjoyed a successful 25-year career as a practicing attorney, eventually becoming a partner with PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Now, as our Mayor, I'm confident she will apply her knowledge, significant business experience and commitment . always to the very best interests our little community.

So . it's time to move on.

Paul Cohune

Moraga

A note from the Editor

Unlike social media platforms, Letters to the Editor submissions must be accurate, cannot involve personal attacks on people or businesses, cannot be defamatory, and cannot include charges without verifiable information to be considered for publication. This includes implications of impropriety without backup documentation to support those claims. We hope Letters to the Editor can continue to be a way to facilitate a healthy dialogue within the community.

Jennifer Wake

Editor

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[back](#)

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