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Published December 21st, 2011

A Year of Shared Sacrifices

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Orinda's December 6th City Council meeting was brief, but informative for the nearly 45 community members in attendance.

Former Orinda mayors Bill Judge and Bobbie Landers joined with leaders from Orinda's business and non-profit communities to thank outgoing Mayor Victoria Smith for her service and witness the election of Council Members Steve Glazer and Amy Worth as Mayor and Vice Mayor, respectively.

Glazer and Worth thanked their colleagues for their unanimous support and observed how much they were looking forward to serving the citizens of Orinda in the coming year.

Glazer then got the ceremonial ball rolling by praising Smith for her efforts. Council Members Worth and Sue Severson echoed his comments and the newest member of the team, Council Member Dean Orr, thanked Smith for her guidance. Each member then took turns reading from a joint resolution honoring the outgoing mayor.

Thanking her family and staff, Smith said, "It has been a really great year," as she gave high marks to City staff for the job they have done during challenging economic times.

She also thanked her fellow Council members, explaining that each brings specific strengths to the governing table. Describing Glazer as having, "political acumen beyond compare," Severson as "the guiding force" behind the Orinda Community Foundation, and Worth as "the mother of the fourth bore of the Caldecott Tunnel," she also praised Dean Orr for his "complete depth and knowledge" in the planning and development arena.

Recalling difficult fiscal reductions that forced the use of employee furloughs - without a corresponding reduction in the needs of Orinda's citizenry - it was, Smith said, "A year of shared sacrifices for everyone."

Orinda's deteriorating infrastructure was also much on her mind, but all was not doom and gloom. Noting that the first of the Wilder homes are now on the market, Smith announced that Wilder's playfields are nearing completion. Smith also delivered the heartening news that Orinda's Theatre Square area is now 95 percent occupied, and credited its new management company with the rapid, nine-month turnaround. "It's the place to be," she said as she talked about teens flocking to the area after school and adults taking part in new events, such as the Orinda Jazz Festival.

Among the City's successes Smith cited the diverse offerings of the Parks and Recreation Department, noted that Orinda is "the safest city of our size in the entire state of California," and praised the impending arrival of affordable senior housing, stating that the Eden project "will be a great addition to our town."

In a follow-up interview, Smith further explored concerns about the City's deteriorating infrastructure. "When I ran seven years ago," she said, "we needed to fix the roads." That, she said, remains the major headache.

The City is projecting a three percent drop in assessed property valuation, something that has never happened before in Orinda's history, according to Smith. Saying that she and her colleagues are "keeping a close hand on the budget," she put things in perspective, however, comparing the small drop in Orinda's valuation to the 20 percent drop experienced by other communities across the Bay Area.

Smith also stressed the role that volunteers play in Orinda. "Just the sheer number of people," she said, is key.

"Having so many people with so many talents - artists, architects," sets Orinda apart. "I think it's probably the high point every year," she said, stating that Orinda would never be able to do what it does if it had to pay for everything it offers its citizens.

Pointing to Theatre Square's 95 percent occupancy rate as another high point of the year, Smith noted that many residents may not realize all of the good that has been happening. The City modified its zoning to enable businesses such as optometric services to open their doors. Kids feel more comfortable and welcome, and the owners of Table 24 plan to open a new Mexican restaurant.

Thanking Orindans for their support, Smith urged everyone to remain engaged - as will she. She plans to start working on a new recycling and garbage franchise agreement. "Our rates have not been as stable as I would have liked." And, she said, the City is also working on a new plastic bag pick-up program to tackle the problem of unwanted shopping bags. She also encouraged residents to "shop and eat Orinda."

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