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Published September 12th, 2012

A Q & A with Orinda's City Council Candidates

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There are two City Council seats available, and Linda Delehunt, Steven Glazer, and Victoria Robinson Smith want them. All are educated, accomplished professionals with solid community service track records. Asked about leadership, community engagement and fiscal responsibility, they graciously responded with more detail than we could hope to cover in a single article.

Orinda has roughly a \$10 million annual budget - small when considering the programs it offers and problems it faces. What shape is the City in - and what must our leaders do over the next 10 years to improve our fiscal picture?

Delehunt: I am very concerned about the great needs related to the infrastructure roadwork that has been a necessity in this city for over 20 years. We seem to be making little progress in terms of addressing this looming issue. My concern is our deficient infrastructure is a safety issue and puts the very quality of our lives as well as our property values at risk.

The reality is that six years ago the Infrastructure Committee identified that we will need \$100 million to repair Orinda's roads. The sales tax measure on the November ballot is projected to generate approximately \$600,000 annually. The city has stated that it will cost \$2.2 million annually to simply maintain the roads after the \$100 million infrastructure repair that has not been done. The bottom line is that the sales tax solution is really not a solution since it does not even cover annual road maintenance.

Additionally, a sales tax increase will negatively impact Orinda small businesses.

While the \$100 million repair figure is staggering, we do need to face these figures head on and utilize our best collaborative citizen thinking to come up with a plan that is acceptable to Orinda residents and that truly addresses the problem. The current 2017 and 2021 bond plans as proposed by the City as a solution are really not a solution since those measures will require the onerous 2/3 majority vote that is seldom an electorate choice and has been identified by surveys as being unacceptable to Orinda residents. We need to address these issues comprehensively now.

Glazer: Despite the economic recession, our city budget is balanced and we maintain prudent reserves. This has occurred because we have eliminated non-essential programs, reduced staff, and improved efficiencies.

Orinda is one of the few cities in California that addresses retirement benefits through a defined contribution plan for employees. Therefore, we do not have the financial overhang of pension or post employment health care obligations that are straining the budget of most other cities.

I am particularly proud of our efforts to involve more citizens in the decision-making process of the town. We have established new advisory and oversight committees on finances, infrastructure and traffic safety. This has made our governance more inclusive and transparent.

We have improved the planning and design review process. This has benefited homeowners who want to improve their property as well as residents who want to ensure that remodeling fits into the character of our unique neighborhoods.

We continue to have a serious infrastructure challenge as our aging roads and drains fail. This is an approximately \$50 million problem in a city whose entire annual budget is around \$10 million. Importantly, the Council has worked hard to spend our scarce road repair dollars in a way that maximizes benefit and cost efficiency.

We have worked hard to secure regional, state and federal grants to improve roads; but, without a new funding source, our roads and drains will continue to deteriorate. The City Council has adopted a 10-year road and drain repair plan, which would be funded, in part, by a small sales tax increase. I strongly encourage our residents to support this effort by voting yes on Measure L this November.

Smith: In April 2009, when the banking world was in freefall, we revised the City's Investment Policy to require that all investments are kept in very safe AA or AAA securities ... we adopted a Reserve Policy which requires the City to maintain an operating reserve of 50 percent of the annual General Fund, but no less than five million dollars. We also adopted a Balanced Budget policy. We have met these requirements each year, even though Orinda experienced a three percent decrease in property tax revenue last year.

We have balanced the budget by making tough decisions.... But we must address our greatest unmet need ... right now, the cost to completely rebuild our roads and storm drains, which we inherited from Contra Costa County, is \$52 million.... With the help of the Citizens Infrastructure Oversight Committee, we will have fixed all of our major roads, and the roads around the schools by 2015. However, we do not have the millions of dollars needed to fix our residential roads.

Two months ago, the City Council adopted a 10 Year Plan.... The first step ... a 1/2 cent sales tax, which is on the November ballot for voter approval ... will be followed in later years by two bond measures, so that ... over time, we will accumulate the money needed to comprehensively repair our roads. While we all recognize that the 1/2 cent sales tax will result in a relatively small amount of money ... it enjoys wide support among the voters and ... we will use the revenue to attack our road deficit and produce measurable results.

What can Orindans do right now to help?

Delehunt: Each citizen should attempt to utilize his or her time in such a way as to contribute to the betterment of life in the community. Everyone's life is a little different and even the smallest contribution can have an impact.

Orinda residents should become actively involved in learning all sides of the issues facing the city. They should also

understand that even though the community is an affluent community, the city does not reflect this affluence. City coffers do not have adequate resources to support all of the current city needs including infrastructure needs. I served as a Girl Scout Leader and founded the first Girl Scout Daisy Troop in Orinda. I am proud to say that, some 20 years later, almost every girl in my Girl Scout troops has gone on to achieve high professional goals and are currently leaders in many sectors of life. I am also particularly proud of the work I have done with the schools both in the local area as well as throughout the state of California.

Glazer: I would encourage our residents to support Measure L. It is an important first step to funding our 10-year road and drain repair plan. I would also encourage our residents to shop and dine in Orinda, thereby helping our local businesses and providing valuable sales tax dollars that fund repairs to Orinda roads.

A great community is a collection of people who are working well together to achieve common goals while respecting their occasional differences. Our founding fathers wrote of each individual's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; but this is possible only when we come together to support each other in reaching these ideals.

I believe deeply in community service and I hope that I have set an example for both my daughters and others in the importance of giving back to the community that has given us so much.

Smith: Orinda's residents are our greatest resource in climbing back from the economic downturn! First, we can all "Shop" and "Eat" Orinda! September 18th is the Orinda Chamber of Commerce Restaurant Tour... September 20th is the Orinda Night Out ... work with your neighbors, fire and police to make your neighborhood safer. September 21-22 is the Orinda Motors Dancing with the Cars Party and Classic Car Show.

Second ... apply to serve on one of the City's Commissions, volunteer with one of the many groups that provide art, music, theater, library support, preserve our environment or our history, raise money for worthy charities, our schools, churches and Scouts; get involved!

In this country we have the privilege and the responsibility to exercise our right to vote, so if you support the 1/2 cent sales tax measure as I do - or if you don't! - get out and vote and help your elected officials do their best to represent you.

Theatre Square is thriving again, delighting residents, but other "downtown development" issues roil the waters. What needs to happen with the downtown, and why?

Delehunt: At Cal, I was fortunate to be a student of Allan Temko ... former Orinda resident and Pulitzer Prize-winning architectural critic. I attempt to live by his high architectural standards. As I look at the various websites and talk with people throughout the city, I can't help but be impressed by the thoughtful plans that the various sectors of our community have crafted. I do believe that there ... can be a "meeting of the minds".... I don't believe there has been enough dialogue ... it is clear to me that many residents feel left out of the conversation.

Small business needs to have particular consideration for the purposes of this discussion. We need to encourage small business development in our city.

Orinda is a relatively new city ... we have to consider that our model of city government may need some revision based on our low revenue and high need status. I would be in favor of examining the operational model of other highly successful small cities with the intent of compiling a list of best practices that we might consider adopting. I would be in favor of instituting town-hall style meetings that might assist the city in reaching a suitable renovation and operational city model.

Glazer: I support efforts to improve our downtown while maintaining its small town charm. The city should be supportive of property owners who want to improve their facilities. This may include upgrading retail and office spaces as well as the addition of residential housing.

I have supported changes to policies affecting Theater Square that have resulted in improved public shopping and dining. And, I have supported improved housing opportunities for seniors in our downtown. Most importantly, I have sought ways to expand opportunities for more citizens to get involved in local government through groups such as the public safety and infrastructure committees.

The current conflict seems to be centered over allowing an increase in building heights. Unless we have a specific plan that makes clear how greater building heights will maintain and enhance Orinda's small town charm, we should resist efforts to arbitrarily increase building heights.

The city doesn't own its downtown, but we have an important role to play in making sure that planning policies protect our city's character while working cooperatively with property owners who want to improve their buildings. The city staff, planning commission, and council should be committed to this shared goal.

Smith: Theatre Square is a gem, and I am very proud that the City has assisted the property owner and the business owners to help make the Square the lively local spot that it is now. A couple of years ago, the Council rezoned the back lane of Theatre [Square] to allow some service businesses to open up; that helped to bring foot traffic in, and now we have a number of highly successful restaurants and some new, diverse shops for our residents to patronize ... the Square is now at 98 percent occupancy!

How do we spread that success throughout the downtown? I think we continue to engage the public in workshops and informally, at the Farmer's Market Council table and during the 4th of July festivities ... to discuss what we collectively want to see. We want to find our own identity - not that of any of our neighbors, large or small.... I believe that the citizens will support good projects in the downtown which respect the desire that residents do have for additional housing and shops and restaurants in the downtown, while at the same time preserving our small town feel and connection to the outdoor environment.

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