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## Orinda City Council Candidates Spar Over Downtown Development, MOFD

By Laurie Snyder



Current Mayor Steve Glazer and City Council Member Victoria Robinson Smith listen as challenger Linda Delehunt answers a question at the October 11 Orinda City Council candidate debate. Photo Ohlen Alexander

There are, said Smith, "a lot of things to admire in our neighboring communities ... but I think the important thing to remember ... is that Danville had a redevelopment agency. That's what built those streets and those shopping centers ... they were willing to say that they had blight in their downtown. They formed a redevelopment agency, which drew money away from their special districts and from their schools, which I don't think people in Orinda would ever have supported ... we need to look at what works for Orinda."

Smith noted that "all of our retail space together is less than one medium-sized Target store...We have what we have, which is a gem in a small city."

Delehunt, who noted that she has "spoken with Orinda Vision and other groups that have come up with some absolutely brilliant plans for downtown," said City leaders handle development via "ad hoc additions to the plan... And I think that's caused a lot of polarization. I think people feel they haven't been heard ... the deadlock is because there hasn't been a clear process where people have felt involvement."

While there are "certain elements of our downtown which people feel could certainly be better," Glazer said, "there is no community consensus on how to make that happen. There's some controversy about the height changes.... But I don't think it comes from great unhappiness that our downtown is a terrible place." A master plan, he said, "doesn't make anything happen. It still takes a property owner who's willing to look for investor capital to improve their property to match that master plan."

As for MOFD, Delehunt expressed her frustration that Orinda households are paying \$400 more annually for fire service than their counterparts in Moraga. "The citizenry came to City Council and asked that this be looked at, and the City Council refused.... Then the citizens went out and got a 220-person petition, and requested that the City Council again look at the situation; the City Council then refused to. My feeling is the City Council should look at this whole situation, should intervene in it."

Smith stated there is "no question that we receive excellent service from the Fire District," and added that MOFD is "in the process of looking at response times which are low in some areas of Orinda." The City, she said, has also "been trying to work with them for over the past year to encourage them to come to Orinda City Hall, and become our tenant with their administrative space."

Glazer expressed his concerns regarding MOFD's ability to balance its budget, pay its pension costs and meet its retiree health care obligations. Regarding potential funding inequities between Moraga and Orinda, he said that "on two occasions, we've created task forces...We have held meetings ... and the Council as a whole decided that there was nothing further that needed to be done. We all recognize that they have an independently elected Board... and that they need to be held accountable for an open, transparent discussion and review of all these important matters."

The small audience at the October 11 City Council candidate debate learned the basics of how Orinda's road repairs are prioritized and about the City's 10-year, four-phase plan to improve those thoroughfares. But it was the discussion between incumbents Steve Glazer and Victoria Smith and challenger Linda Delehunt regarding Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) operations and potential changes to the character of the City's downtown that provided glimpses of what may be in store for Orindans in the future.

Delehunt, Glazer and Smith discussed the City's General Plan, and what would be appropriate for Orinda's commercial development.

When asked what might be added to the current business mix, Glazer explained that Orinda's "General Plan says that retail should be resident-serving, not necessarily as regional attractions," but to "provide for things that our residents would like to shop for nearby." He likes Orinda's existing restaurants, but agreed that a specialty market, bakery, or other offerings might be well received.

"You know, I've been so envious of Lafayette's - their situation," said Delehunt, "growing and putting nice things here and there...I've lived here 32 years, and I'm just kind of demoralized, frankly. I feel that we really need to grow up and look like Danville.... And I think what we put in our City is dependent on what the community wants."

Reach the reporter at: [laurie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:laurie@lamorindaweekly.com)

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