

Published January 1st, 2014

## Navigating Challenging Financial Seas while Looking Toward a Brighter Horizon

*Orinda mayor Sue Severson sets city's course for 2014**By Laurie Snyder*

Sue Severson Photo Ohlen Alexander

"I had the great privilege of meeting Sue Severson while serving as President of Orinda Arts Council (2002-03) and was struck immediately by her depth of character, sincerity, poise, and willingness to hear every voice and concern," wrote Orindan Elena Pang in a letter to the Lamorinda Weekly Oct. 13, 2010. "Sue balances her volunteerism between civic duties, work in the schools, support for the arts, and family life. Her generosity of spirit and humanity are insurmountable. Our community has been the lucky recipient of her positive presence, practical solutions, and experience. She understands and believes fiscal responsibility as priority and supports ongoing respectful communication between our community members and leaders."

Severson, who served for nine years as a board member of the Orinda Union School District, was first elected to the Orinda City Council in 2006. Since then, she helped to launch the Orinda Community Foundation ([www.orindafoundation.org/](http://www.orindafoundation.org/)), which relieved the city of much of its financial burden during the national economic decline for Orinda's Fourth of July Parade and other events deemed by Orindans to be vital to the health of the community.

Severson sat down with Lamorinda Weekly at her home just after she took over the reins of the city as mayor for the second time. Still catching her breath after a year that many longtime community members say was one of

the busiest ever for the Orinda City Council, she has been mulling over priorities for 2014-15, and plans to present her State of the City Address sometime in March. Traditionally delivered at a joint Orinda Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce meeting, this year's address may be held twice to accommodate Orindans' increasingly diverse scheduling needs.

According to the National League of Cities, "fragile fiscal health" is high on 2014's list of "10 Critical Imperatives Facing Cities," along with the worsening of America's transportation infrastructure. In response, Severson observed, "It's always an ongoing challenge - with increasing costs and decreasing revenues - to maximize your resources while maintaining the high level of services expected by the community." Fortunately, Orinda "is very fiscally conservative as a city and has always had a balanced budget," she added. "We need to look ahead to make sure that continues to happen - to keep the cuts away from services as much as possible."

Having a balanced budget is no small feat in today's world, she said, and is even more challenging in Orinda because when the city incorporated, it inherited a decrepit drainage system from the county. At more than 50 years old, "All of it is beyond its lifespan." And with only about \$10 million each year to repair those problems plus support all of the standard services the city must deliver each year - housing development oversight by the planning department, maintenance and repair of roads and drains, parks and recreation services, public safety services provided by the police - money is tight.

That's why reserves are so critical. Drainage failures - like those on Glorietta and Tarabook that required million dollar-plus fixes each - can be tipping points for cities, along with earthquakes, mudslides, and Yosemite-type wildfires. "A city is basically like a household in terms of budgeting," explained Severson. "If you have an unexpected illness, accident, loss of job - if you haven't planned ahead and set aside a reserve, you could easily, as a family, be wiped out." Vallejo. Stockton. San Bernardino. So many city governments have seen no other way out but to file for bankruptcy.

But not Orinda. "We're really running a tight ship financially to accomplish a lot of good and provide excellent service - despite our limited resources."

One of the other things Severson takes pride in is the role she played in helping to establish the Finance Advisory Committee, a body of Orinda residents with financial management experience which provides guidance to the city council in very much the same way as the Citizens' Infrastructure Oversight Committee. Its members were, in fact, the ones who advised the City Council to gradually set aside a \$5 million reserve to help get life moving again for residents should disaster strike.

Ultimately, said Severson, "I hope that we will come together in a more united, collaborative way - in a kinder

LAMORINDA WEEKLY | Navigating Challenging Financial Seas while Loo...zon Orinda mayor Sue Severson sets city's course for 2014 | Orinda way - to be supportive of each other, to work together to better our community." One way to do that is to answer your phone this month when the city conducts its annual telephone poll regarding city services and the next steps Orinda should take when funding future road and drain upgrades. Another is to show your civic pride by volunteering for a city commission or helping with Orinda Action Day.

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

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