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New Mayor Has High Hopes for Progress on Roads and Downtown during her 2016 Term

By Victor Ryerson



Victoria Smith Photo Ohlen Alexander

As the saying goes, this is not the first time at the rodeo for Victoria Smith, Orinda's new mayor. An 11-year veteran of the City Council, she served as mayor in 2008 and 2012 and has realistic expectations about what a mayor can and cannot accomplish. This time, she hopes to preside over the resolution of Orinda's ongoing road rebuilding problem and start a serious dialogue about rejuvenating the downtown during her year in office. The job is "more about process than substantive change," she observed in a recent interview. The mayor does not have any greater power than the other council members, she explained, but in concert with other council members, the city manager, and the city staff, the mayor establishes the agenda for meetings. The order in which agenda items are heard depends upon the level of community interest in particular matters, and items of greater interest are placed on the agenda for earlier discussion at the evening meetings to facilitate public participation.

One important job of the mayor is conducting a monthly liaison meeting with representatives of various community organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, and Orinda Association to discuss their particular concerns.

This provides her with the opportunity to express what she is interested in. As she sees it, the mayor is the "spokesperson for the City Council." But she emphasizes that the council is a policy making body, and the management of the city is left to the city manager and staff.

As for the substantive issues she hopes to advance during her term, her highest priority is clearly Orinda's roads. The major theme of her recent election campaign, she gives the impression that she will not rest until the last of the job is done in accordance with the desires of the community and, by extension, the council. At present, that means repairing all roads to a standard equating to "good," and making provision for keeping them that way, a policy selected from several options by the council. (See accompanying story on page A7.)

The other big ticket item she hopes to move during her watch is starting the conversation about what Orinda should do – if anything – about its downtown. With a new planning director coming onboard early in 2016, she is hopeful that this will happen soon. Although she says she has no particular idea of what the downtown should look like in the future, her vision includes the addition of shops and restaurants that residents will want to visit. How these will be developed will be determined after community study and discussion, she says, emphasizing that it "needs to be an orderly process."

She also says that development will need to be economically feasible, which suggests that dreamers who are not realistic will have to tread with caution to get her attention. Finally, she feels that proponents on all sides will have to be willing to "meet in the middle." The process, she recognizes, will require a "long period of input," extending well beyond her current term as mayor.

Transportation issues are intertwined with parking and development, in Smith's view. For example, she believes that having BART in Orinda is both a benefit and a burden, enhancing residents' transportation options while creating a concomitant overflow parking problem as it becomes more popular. By the same token, she says that if residents want to see more restaurants or retail stores downtown, Orinda will need to accommodate people coming from elsewhere, because residents cannot support new businesses entirely on their own.

There are a couple of pieces of unfinished business Smith would like to conclude on her watch. One is establishing the rules governing smoking in public places. The other is that of the commercial use of plastic bags, which many neighboring communities now regulate.

Smith appears to be optimistic about Orinda's future, even if it evolves slowly. With a long history of service to the community, both as a council member and before, she has the realistic outlook of a veteran that dramatic changes will not occur overnight. On the other hand, she also has historical perspective, and has witnessed steady increments of progress alter the face of the city over time.

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