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New Vice Mayor enthusiastic about Orinda downtown development

By Sora O'Doherty



Incoming Vice Mayor Inga Miller Photo Sora O'Doherty

Like the "yang" to Mayor Amy Worth's "yin" new Vice Mayor Inga Miller has only been on the Orinda City Council for one year. She ran on a platform of downtown development, and she is feeling really good about the city's progress on first steps. She is very happy with the Thursday night food truck event that has been extremely popular with city residents.

She is also excited about the possible restoration of San Pablo Creek. She went to San Luis Obispo to look at their creek walk and talk to city staff. What used to be a dumping ground and had an "auto row" along the waterway has been transformed, although it took 30 years to accomplish. She also took the creek walk in Denver. Orinda is having serious dialog with the Friends of Orinda Creeks, and talks with owners of property adjoining the creek about things that could benefit both the property owners and the public. Next steps include obtaining hydraulic studies and finding the funds necessary to accomplish the restoration. The concerned parties are actively meeting. It is the beginning of a partnership, Miller says, and it involves the Streetscape Master Planning with which the city is going forward.

Miller feels that the negative views of downtown development are based on fear, but she believes that change can be done in a way that will make things

better. She wants to keep the views of the hills, but bring more opportunity to do the things that residents want to do. The downtown subcommittee is very special, she says, and people feel that they can bring their views and really be heard. Miller sits on the subcommittee along with former mayor Eve Phillips.

Miller believes that incorporation makes zoning easier. Before incorporation, Orinda had no city hall, the community center did not have the same level of activities, the roads were falling into disrepair, there weren't building restrictions and the community had no local control. Incorporation made zoning easier, and Miller praised the city's "extremely adept" planning department.

However, Senate Bill 35 is a real challenge, she says. She also says that the author, Scott Weiner, wants to go back and make changes. As it stands, Miller believes that the law actually is counterproductive to its primary purpose, which is to encourage more housing. While Weiner very much wants to make more opportunities for more affordable housing, his bill provides a disincentive for cities to zone for multi-family housing because it allows developers to bypass city rules if they build multi-family residences and pay prevailing wages. SB 35 only applies to land already zoned for multi-family dwellings, and Miller doesn't see the city adding any multi-family zoning in the foreseeable future.

When asked if she could envision a time when Orinda would join with the jurisdictions of Lafayette and Moraga, Miller said she could not. Orinda is not Lafayette, she said, with better traffic control. Additionally, Orinda is more fiscally conservative than either Lafayette or Moraga. With its small tax base, Orinda provides employees with a 401(a) investment plan but is not a PERS city, like Moraga. Orinda puts an amount equal to 10 percent of each employee's salary into a 401(a) account, and matches an additional 3 percent contributed by the employee.

Miller is married and practices transactional real estate law.

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