

## Meet Orinda's New Mayor

By Andrea A. Firth



Victoria Smith

Photo Andrea A. Firth

**“R**oads, roads, roads, and more roads,” states Victoria Smith emphatically. Fixing the main arteries and neighborhood streets will be a primary focus for the City of Orinda over the next year according to Orinda’s newly appointed mayor. Taking seat at the helm of the City Council in the final year of her four-year term, Mayor Smith anticipates that Orinda will once again carry the dubious distinction of having some of the worst roads in the Bay Area. With the cost to fix the roads and drains throughout the city estimated to be \$100 million and two ballot measures to fund the repairs having recently failed passage, Mayor Smith notes, “We continue to struggle with the issue. It’s a long-term problem for Orinda.”

However, Smith’s pragmatic approach and positive attitude prevails as she describes the road-works planned for Moraga Way next summer. “Our project has been in the works for quite a long time, and we finally received the CalTrans grant which is fantastic. We are happy that we can get a million dollars in grant money,” states Smith. “It is a very big project for us, and it will repave a heavily traveled road in Orinda. So we’re pleased.” However, Mayor Smith is not so pleased with EBMUD’s plans to close Moraga Road between Moraga and downtown Lafayette during the same timeframe this summer, and she feels that much of the diverted traffic will find its way to Rheem Boulevard, Glo-

rietta Way, and then onto Moraga Way further slowing traffic through Orinda.

Smith and her husband, a native Orindan, relocated to the area 20 years ago when they were looking for a place to live that had good schools and great outdoor spaces. “Orinda really is unique,” notes Smith. “The people who have been involved with city government before have done an excellent job. And the community has done an excellent job of wanting and supporting a community that is semirural. And we really are.” However, Smith recognizes that the “semirural” designation comes with both the good and the bad. “The bad side is the condition of our roads and that they are narrow and windy,” explains Smith. But she quickly qualifies this negative with a positive noting Orinda’s proximity to larger cities including San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, and Walnut Creek while still being surrounded by nature and wildlife. “I think that it is very attractive that you can be close to all of the wonderful amenities that we enjoy in northern California—sporting events, theater. And yet here in Orinda, it’s quiet, it’s peaceful, and it has a great natural beauty.”

A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley and UC’s Hastings College of Law in San Francisco, Smith has maintained a real estate law practice in Orinda for over 20 years. Her first foray into public service was as a representative on the Contra Costa County Family and Children’s Trust Advisory Committee which makes recommendations regarding the allocation of funds for the prevention and treatment of child abuse. “Unfortunately, it’s a huge problem and there is a very small amount of money to work with. But it was very rewarding to find programs that were actively trying to prevent child abuse and help people who had been the victims of child abuse.”

After serving at the County level for over three years, Smith had a desire to get more involved locally and subsequently was appointed to the Planning Commission in Orinda. “I take my hat off to the Planning Commission. I think they have the most difficult job,” states Smith. “It’s very time consuming. And many times you have conflicting interests.”

Smith feels that serving on the Planning Commission provided excellent experience for being on the City Council, and she is excited to discuss two affordable housing projects in the planning stages in Orinda. “The Orinda Grove development will include eight affordable homes

for families, and we are working on guidelines to provide priority to people who work and live in Orinda, and those who are teachers, police officers and municipal employees.” In addition, Orinda will be taking steps to build a 44-unit residential complex at the old city library site to provide affordable housing for seniors. “Both of these developments will provide more opportunity for residency in Orinda and will allow Orinda to receive the regional funding, Measure C dollars, that we use to repave our roads.” Explains Smith.

“[In addition] the Wilder Development should be moving forward,” notes Mayor Smith. She is looking forward to the amenities this development will provide to the City such as an art and garden center and five playing fields including two with lights. “This is going to be a great thing for our residents, and we’re anxious to see it built.”

Downtown revitalization is another key initiative for the City Council in 2008 according to Smith. “We really need sales tax dollars to stay in Orinda, and we do have the shops to provide the goods.” The Shop Orinda Program promoted by the City Chamber of Commerce is a part of the plan, and she has been pleased to see black canvas Shop Orinda totes showing up on the shoulders of shoppers around town. Smith also feels that the Cal Shakes box office that has been opened in Theater Square is a natural fit and hopes one day to establish a shuttle to transport theater goers to and from the plays and to downtown restaurants. Ultimately, Mayor Smith recognizes that it takes a critical mass. “We want to see more merchants, more restaurants, and I think we probably would like to see some housing above [downtown].”

With all that is in the works with the City Council over the next year, it is no surprise that Mayor Smith claims to have no time for hobbies beyond regular walks along Wildcat Canyon at the top of El Toyonal. Still, Smith appears comfortable in her new role as the Mayor of Orinda. “It’s a very rewarding feeling to say that I have enjoyed the benefits of living in this community for quite some time. My kids grew up here. My husband has lived here most of his adult life. And it’s nice to be in a position to give back to the community. For the term of my tenure on the Council, I can be a steward for the community and help preserve the things that are great about Orinda and also help look out toward the future and try and tinker with those things we can improve on.”