

Meet City Planner Niroop Srivatsa

By Cathy Tyson



Niroop Srivatsa, Planning & Building Manager Photo Andy Scheck

“We came back from India at midnight on September 10, 2001. We had eight pieces of luggage, the kids were exhausted from the flight, and the customs official looked at us, said the kids looked tired and just let us go,” said Niroop Srivatsa of the start of her second time around as Lafayette’s Planning and Building Manager. “I thought the next day, that wouldn’t have happened. We came back to a different country. We had to start from scratch; we lived in a hotel for a month. It was rough, but we got over it.” At the time her two children were in ninth and seventh grades.

It’s been a bit of a circuitous route for Srivatsa. Born and raised in Madras, in southern India, she has a bachelor’s degree in architecture. Because an aunt and uncle are architects, she says she was naturally drawn to that. “They were building fairly contemporary houses in India, it was so different from the house in which I grew up. Our ancestral home is over 200 years old; several generations lived in the same home.”

Seeing the mix of old and new influenced how she sees city planning. “It made me realize that there isn’t one single form or shape or design that’s correct.” Srivatsa continues, “I moved to city planning after being an architect because it impacts a greater number of people. It deals with the physical form of an entire city rather than just a building.”

Coming to the U.S. exposed her to new concepts and ideas, “It opened my entire world. My first job was as a planner for Naperville, Illinois near Chicago. I did the city’s first General Plan, and then came here.” The family spent 10 years there, a big change from the tropical locale of Madras. “As a new immigrant, you never know what your experience is going to be. Naperville was a most welcoming town. We still have friends there, we loved the place. Both cities, although different in size are so similar because Naperville was a big “small town,” and that’s the beauty of Lafayette as well.”

As Planning & Building Manager since 2001, her role is to implement the General Plan, the blue print of city land use. Collectively the department spends about half of its time processing development applications, whether it’s to build a small addition to a house or to build the Lafayette Mercantile project.

“We process about 250 applications every year; help an applicant through the process, at the staff level, Design Review level, Planning Commission or the City Council. Another large chunk of the department’s time is helping the public, “Staff takes turns at the counter and to answer phone calls eight hours a day.” A smaller portion of time is spent collaborating with Orinda, Moraga, the County and regional bodies and on long range issues.

“I spend most of my time, at least currently, working on redevelopment and housing issues and processing some of the larger projects like The Woodbury and the Mercantile.” In her spare time, she volunteers at Tony La Russa’s Animal Rescue Foundation. “I get so much joy and peace from the dogs; I am lucky to be doing this.”

What does she think Lafayette will look like in 10 years? “I see it continuing to remain a most perfect place in which to live and raise a family. I still see the ridgelines and hillsides protected, still see high quality and very exciting developments in a vibrant downtown. We have great bones in Lafayette. We need to protect and enhance what we have and watch our city flourish.”