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Published October 29th, 2008

Sorenson Leads OUSD Board in Difficult Economic Times

By Andrea A. Firth

Having recently stepped into the president's shoes on the Orinda Union School District (OUSD) Governing Board, Riki Sorenson knows the District will face some difficult challenges over the next year. Sorenson feels that the three biggest issues that the Board will deal with are the state budget crisis, the Pine Grove property project, and the proposed parcel tax.

"We have already trimmed everything that we can within the District's budget," states Sorenson, who anticipates that the District will have to deal with midyear cuts to State education funding.

The demolition at the Pine Grove development, which requires moving the District offices and maintenance facility by the end of December, is one of the most pressing issues that Sorenson has to manage. "This is the most controversial issue that I have dealt with since being on the Board," says Sorenson, who has worked on this issue for four of the past six years she has served on the Board.

The Pine Grove development will require the District administrators to be relocated over the next eighteen months until a new District office is constructed at the site. The more challenging element of the relocation process is that maintenance operation, which has been sharing space with the City, must also be moved to a completely new site.

After previous locations at the Wagner Ranch and DeLaveaga properties fell through as relocation options, the District hired a consultant to rethink the maintenance operation and its facility needs. Sorenson explains that the Board is evaluating a proposal to downsize the physical space needs of the maintenance facility and to switch to a more mobile operation with a small administrative center and well-equipped trucks. The place for this new vision of a maintenance operation remains the challenge.

"We have to be able to maintain our schools. They need a place to work," explains Sorenson. She recently attended a meeting of teachers, parents, and Ivy Drive residents to discuss the plan for using a blacktop at Orinda Intermediate School (OIS) as a temporary site for the maintenance crew and their belongings. The OIS site had been identified, in part, because the location already has utilities in place from portables that had been housed there during the OIS modernization project.

Along with noise and safety concerns, a major objection of the Ivy Drive residents to the proposed placement at OIS is the potential for increased traffic which is already a significant problem and sore subject in the neighborhood. Sorenson acknowledges the neighbors concerns but feels that the seven-man maintenance crew will not add a significant amount of traffic. "We have talked about having the maintenance workers arrive early, by 6:45, to get their working orders and move on to the schools to avoid heavier traffic times," she explains.

Sorenson's third big agenda item is the proposed parcel tax to help further fund the OUSD. Sorenson and fellow Board member Pam West are part of a subcommittee that is working on the parcel tax initiative. "It will be interesting to see how measures across the State fare in this environment," notes Sorenson. She believes that the Board is in consensus that a parcel tax should be placed on the ballot in 2009, but when and how much must still be determined.

Reach the reporter at: andrea@lamorindaweekly.com

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