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Orinda Recruits for Committee and Commission Vacancies

By Andrea A. Firth



Orinda residents at a Planning Process Review meeting Photo Andrea A. Firth

With the start of the new year, Orinda's City Council will embark upon the annual recruitment process to fill vacancies on the various City Committees and Commissions that are staffed by volunteer residents. Orinda has approximately eighty community volunteers who serve as members on the fifteen active committees and commissions and couple of task forces that are winding down. "The residents of Orinda feel community participation is important-an essential element to a strong and open governing process. People here are very capable and very generous with their time, and the City greatly benefits from this," says Mayor Sue Severson.

The committees and commissions that function in Orinda serve in a variety of advisory roles including finance, planning, public safety, community services and aesthetics. In many ways the City's various committees and commissions are an extension of city operations. While they coordinate with the City Council and Staff, they conduct their reviews independently, and their role is typically to advise, not decide.

"There is a great deal of Staff and Council effort and time that goes into supporting our various committees," notes City Manager Janet Keeter. "However, given the limited budget that the City has to operate and provide services, it is a wonderful gift of time and expertise that the residents give to the City. Many of the

resident volunteers have backgrounds in finance (including budgeting and investing), planning, engineering, real estate, art, architecture, and the list goes on. Were it not for many of these individuals, the City would need to hire and pay for the expertise," she adds.

Severson concurs, "As a small City with a small budget, we could not afford to pay for the level of expertise and advice that we receive from the members of our committees, commissions, and task forces. The commitment to community volunteerism is one of Orinda's greatest strengths."

The work of many of these committees, commissions, and task forces requires a considerable investment of time and energy, and the issues that they are asked to tackle are not without the potential for controversy. "The individuals who join the committees take their appointments and the goals of their committees seriously," states Severson. As the Council representative on the recently disbanded Revenue Enhancement Task Force, she worked with the group to distill the voluminous amount of information generated into a nine-point plan for the public to review, which faced some criticism from members of the Moraga Orinda Fire District. "Our task was to look at all the options," explains Severson. "The task force did not pre-select, couch or ignore any of the ideas that came forward. We did not eliminate anything, and it evolved into the nine-point plan that was presented. It was an amazing process," she adds.

The work of the Planning Process Review Task Force (PPRTF) is another prime example of resident volunteers tackling some tough issues and then working through the public review process. "The PPRTF members immersed themselves into learning and understanding the Planning Department's current operations and means of processing residential and commercial plans and proposals. Armed with that information, and with some first hand experience, the members very methodically and intensely developed recommendations for improvement," explains Keeter. "We are now at a point in time where the PPRTF is vetting the recommendations through a public workshop process before submitting the final report to the Planning Commission and the City Council. This type of thorough analysis by the PPRTF, although it involved an immense amount of staff time, supplemented the City's ability and resources to conduct such a study," she adds.

The process of including resident volunteers aligns with the practice of involving community members in local government, according to Keeter. The involvement not only educates residents in the City's functions and challenges, but also provides the City with different perspectives. "As a committee or commission member, a resident is taken on as a partner with the City," says Severson. "The City values their expertise and input. It's a collaborative process."

Applications for the current committee and commission openings in Orinda are available at the City website (www.cityoforinda.org) and further information can be obtained from the City Clerk's office (email: molsen@cityoforinda.org; phone 253-4221).

Reach the reporter at: andrea@lamorindaweekly.com

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