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## Council Imposes Last Offer on Employees

By Andrea A. Firth

Tough times. Tough talks. Tough outcome. After negotiating for over a year, the city of Orinda and the members of the Orinda Employees Association (OEA Local #1) had reached an impasse. The employees union had rejected the City's final contract offer, which included a 4% reduction in pay and reduced medical benefits. Last week, Orinda's City Council voted four to one to unilaterally implement the agreement, and the new terms became effective immediately. Council Member Victoria Smith was the lone dissenting vote. "I was surprised and disappointed that the union did not accept the agreement," stated City Manager Janet Keeter. She acknowledged that bargaining representatives on both sides devoted significant time and effort over the year to reach an agreement in the face of the City's declining revenues. "It was necessary to make cuts, and our biggest expense is personnel costs," stated Keeter. "I am trying to avoid layoffs." OEA Local #1, which represents the City's 24 non-management staffers, had been working without a contract since the end of June. While the employees were prepared to accept the reduced compensation from 10.5 furlough days, the major obstacle for the union to ratify the agreement was a reduction in medical benefits. "[The employees] were willing to give up many perks in order to keep the medical benefits status quo," stated Jeanette Irving, a senior administrative assistant in the police department, in her comments to the Council. Employees will now be offered a health plan that is of lower cost to the City (the PERS Select family plan). Employees who choose to stay with a more expensive health plan-many participate in the Kaiser family plan or Blue Shield of CA-will be responsible for the difference in premium cost. The protracted negotiating process was also marred by miscommunication and distrust. "I'm very disappointed with how the negotiations have been handled," stated Irving. "It is unfortunate that the membership was not adequately informed to make good decisions." "I never felt like we negotiated. It was all about giving back," stated Tod Fierner, President of OEA Local #1 and a member of the employee negotiating team. "There was a distrust," he added, noting that some employees became skeptical of the process. When pressed for further explanation by Vice Mayor McCormick, who expressed concern about the distrust issue, Fierner stated, "I don't think anyone distrusts [the Council]." Fierner indicated that he believed that the employees would move forward from this point and that the working relationship between staff and management would heal over time. In the end, it came down to maintaining a balanced budget. "It's a challenging time," stated Mayor Sue Severson. "With declining revenues, no one walks away from negotiations happy. But we have to be fiscally responsible, and we face more unknowns regarding the budget as we continue into the future." Mandatory furlough days are also part of the 2009-10 agreement with the City's managers. City offices and departments will be closed on furlough days which are currently set for November 25th, December 28th through the 31st, February 12th, March 12th, April 9th, May 28th, June 18th, and one half-day to be determined. The estimated salary cost savings provided by the furlough days to be taken by the general employees' unit will save the City approximately \$57,000 over the next nine months.

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