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Orinda Historical Society Looks Back and Forward

By Andrea A. Firth



Orinda architect Bill Simpson Photo by Kent Long

About eighty locals gathered at the Orinda Community Church for the Orinda Historical Society's year-end holiday gathering and enjoyed a cocktail reception and catered dinner. To start off the evening, longtime Orinda residents Bobbie Landers and Dick Heggie were recognized with the Orinda Historical Society Awards for 2009 for their exceptional efforts to preserve Orinda's past for current and future generations.

The theme for the evening was Downtown Orinda, Yesterday & Tomorrow with presentations by local architect Bill Simpson and Orinda Theater's new owner Tom Peterson. Simpson, a resident of Orinda for 46 years, displayed a compendious knowledge of the many development projects that have been proposed, and in some cases built, throughout Orinda's residential neighborhoods and downtown district. Simpson described the development of the BART station, Orinda Woods, and Theater Square and the architectural challenges associated with each project while presenting a trove of photos of the city from the past 40 years. Sharing his experience as part of the Orinda Association (OA) prior to the City's incorporation, Simpson noted, "We worked very hard on the OA, but many of the ideas did not come to pass."

Simpson then looked forward to his vision, created with fellow resident and urban planner Peter Hasselman, for a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly downtown Orinda that would literally bridge

Gateway Center and Orinda Village. He exhibited Hasselman's colorful, energetic sketches of a revitalized and architecturally reworked commercial District that would include street-side dining, public plazas, and cascading waterfalls.

Theater owner Tom Peterson was also on hand to talk to guests about the Orinda of tomorrow, which he hopes will always include the historic art-deco landmark that he manages with partner James Sheehan. "What you have is a real treasure, and we know how to treat your treasure" said Peterson, who has worked in theaters for the past 40 years. Peterson described some of the maintenance that he has already completed at the theater, which includes new lighting and repaired seats. While he acknowledged that the independent theater business is not easy these days, Peterson remained committed and cautiously optimistic that he and Sheehan would be profitable in their venture. "We love old theaters," said Peterson concluding with, "Thank you for allowing us in your neighborhood."



Orinda Theater owner Tom Peterson Photo by Kent Long



Bobbie Landers (center R) and Dick Heggie (R) recipients of the Orinda Historical Society Awards for 2009 with OHS President Lucy Hupp Williams (L) and Charles Voolmar (L center) Photo by Kent Long

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