



**Independent, locally owned and operated!**

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published January 6th, 2010

## How it Works-The Local Civic Process

By Andrea A. Firth

As great a place as Lamorinda is to live, it has not been immune to the economic downturn and is not without its share of problems and challenges. You are still dodging potholes on your street, and it looks like you may be faced with the prospect of more and higher taxes to address your community's aging infrastructure. While the police and fire departments do a great job, you understand that the costs for these services are quickly spiraling upward and the best solution to this dilemma is unclear at this point. The city governments seems to be doing the best they can with very limited revenue streams, but you are frustrated by the limited retail options, empty storefronts, and poor parking that contribute to you heading elsewhere to spend your money and keep sales tax dollars from your own community's coffers. These are the issues that face your community-have you stopped to think about how these problems will get fixed and who will make it happen?

Maybe one of your new year's resolutions could be to take your participation in local governance up a notch. How it Works-The Local Civic Process is a series of articles to be published in the Lamorinda Weekly that will review how government operates in Lamorinda and how you can keep informed about or become a part of this process.

### How it Works-The Local Civic Process

#### *City/Town Council Meetings*

You keep yourself fairly well informed about local civic happenings by reading the paper, but do you really know what goes on at a City Council meeting? Do you have an opinion or idea that you would like to share with the City Council but never get around to finding out who to contact and where to send it? Your City or Town Council meeting is the place to make that happen, to let your voice be heard; and to hear what your representatives, the City and Town Council members, and others are saying.

To help demystify the City/Town Council meeting, here are some of the basic facts about the process.

**Meeting Schedule.** The three municipalities that make up Lamorinda-two cities, Lafayette and Orinda and one town, Moraga-each hold regularly scheduled Council meetings twice a month (see sidebar). The agendas for the meetings and staff reports that provide background for the material to be covered are posted at the city/town websites at least 72-hours in advance of the meeting. You can also request to receive advance notification of Council meetings via email; contact the City/Town Clerk. Copies of the agenda and support documents are available at the Council meetings as well-easy to pick up as you walk in. The Council members, legal counsel, and City/Town Manager and Clerk usually all attend; other staff members attend as needed; and all members of the public are welcome. Special meetings, such as budget and planning workshops, are held throughout the year; although these meetings are typically announced well in advance, a special meeting can be called with as little as 24-hours notice.

**Closed Session.** If the process is so public, what's closed session about? The Council can meet in closed session to discuss only certain things such as threatened litigation, litigation, labor negotiations, lease negotiations, and property acquisitions. Members of the public can not attend but may give a public comment at the outset. Closed session meetings are often held just prior to or after regular Council meetings, and an agenda delineating the subject to be discussed is posted in advance. If any action, e.g. a vote, is taken by the Council at closed session it will be reported to the public at the start of the regular Council meeting.

**Public Forum/Comment.** Here's your chance to be heard. In the beginning of the Council meeting, the public is invited to address the Council on items that are not part of the agenda. Don't be surprised or disappointed if the Council does not immediately respond to these comments-they can't. If the issue has not been publicly noticed as part of the meeting agenda to allow others who might be interested to listen or comment, the Council cannot discuss the item. You can request that the issue be placed on the agenda of a future Council meeting and provide copies of relevant documents-bring multiple copies for the Council and staff.

Otherwise, all other public comments are made during the meeting when the agenda item is discussed. Routinely staff will start by giving their report. The issue will then be opened to the public for comment, and the Council may engage in discussion with the public.

When making a public comment, you may be asked to complete a speaker card and to state if you are a resident. Providing your name and address is customary. Be prepared-your time is limited, comments are typically restricted to three minutes. You may also submit your comments in writing to the City/Town Clerk for distribution to the Council members.

**Consent Calendar.** Routine items, such as meeting minutes and warrants (checks written by the City), that do not require Council discussion are grouped in the consent calendar and approved by the Council with a single vote. A staff report that outlines each of these items is part of the meeting packet and available for the public to review. A Council member can pull a consent calendar item from the blanket approval if he/she feels discussion is needed prior to approval.

**Public Hearings.** As required by law, specific agenda items, such as the appeal of a decision by the Planning Commission, require that a public hearing be held. Staff usually reviews their report and recommendation at the start of the hearing. For example, in the case of a Planning Commission decision appeal, the Planning Director provides the background of the property, the application, and the Commission's decision. Next, testimony is given, e.g., the property owner tells his side of the story and explains why he is appealing the decision. He may have his

architect or other representative on hand to help, and other involved parties, such as neighbors, are given the opportunity to speak. The Council can ask questions, they discuss the issue among themselves publicly, and then usually vote on the matter. Not all Council meetings have public hearings.

Policy Matters. Often much of the Council meeting is taken up with presentations and discussions related to the business of the city-e.g. new development guidelines proposed by a citizen's task force, changes to the Specific Plan that will promote revitalization in the downtown district, public opinion polls about Charter City status or new tax measures. These are often complex topics that yield debate and intelligent discussion, and that can lead to significant changes in the community. Policy matters are issues worthy of your attention and your feedback on these issues is encouraged.

What if You Can't Make It? Meeting minutes are posted online, but this usually takes at least two meetings cycles to occur. If you want to know exactly what transpired sooner, you can obtain an audio file of the meeting from the Clerk's office for a small fee.

The next topic to be covered in the How it Works-The Local Civic Process will be the basics of the Brown Act. City/Town Council Regular Meeting Schedule 2010

#### Moraga

Second and fourth Wednesday of each month starting at 7:30 p.m. and held in the Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School Auditorium, 1010 Camino Pablo

For agenda and staff reports go to: [http://moraga.ca.us/production/moraga\\_agendas\\_town\\_council.php](http://moraga.ca.us/production/moraga_agendas_town_council.php)

#### Lafayette

Second and fourth Monday of each month starting at 7:00 p.m. and held in Community Hall, Lafayette Library and Learning Center, 3941 Mt. Diablo Boulevard

Exceptions: The first meeting in October will be held on Tuesday, October 12th and the only regularly meeting in December will be Monday, December 13th.

For agenda and staff reports go to:

<http://lafayette.waterware.com/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-23>

#### Orinda

First and third Tuesday of each month starting at 7:00 p.m. and held in the Library Auditorium, 26 Orinda Way

Exception: The first meeting in April will be held on Tuesday, April 13th.

For agenda and staff reports go to:

<http://orinda.waterware.com/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-75>

Reach the reporter at: [andrea@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:andrea@lamorindaweekly.com)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA