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Orinda Turns 25-The Story of Incorporation

As told by Bobbie Landers to Andrea A. Firth



Members of Orinda's first City Council riding in the 4th of July parade in 1985. Seated in back (L to R) Aldo Guidotti, Bobbie Landers, Dick Heggie (the first Mayor); in front, Bill Dabel and Joe Harb (driver). Photo courtesy of the Orinda Historical Society

Two earlier attempts had failed miserably-in the mid-1950's there was insufficient support to get the option on the ballot, and in 1967 it was voted down two to one. But by the early 1980's, the mood locally had changed, and it seemed possible. An active group of residents believed putting the question to the voters again might just work, so they went to work. And in March of 1985, the residents of Orinda voted to incorporate as a city. "The vote for incorporation won hands down," says Bobbie Landers, one of the members of Orinda's first City Council.

Local control was the impetus for incorporating, according to Landers. Prior to 1985, Orinda's public services, including planning development and police and fire services, were managed by Contra Costa County. "We always felt that when we went to the County Board of Supervisors Orinda's needs were a low priority," says Landers, who served as the administrator for the Orinda Association [OA]. Established in the 1940's, the OA functioned as a quasi-governmental organization.

The group followed what was happening at the County level and represented Orinda's interests to the Board of Supervisors.

Orinda had taken some steps toward self-governance with the establishment of the first local area planning commission in the County and the creation of a parks and recreation commission and a police commission. But the commissions were limited to advisory roles, and the County retained ultimate authority. "We still did not feel like we had total control. The control was in Martinez, and we had just one supervisor to represent us," says Landers.

In 1983, Orinda resident Richard Procnier came to the OA Board to encourage his fellow Orindans to try for incorporation again. Procnier knew the retiring administrator for the County, Joseph McBrien, and proposed that McBrien evaluate the situation to determine if it was fiscally viable to pursue incorporation given Orinda's relatively small tax base. McBrien's report supported the feasibility of incorporation for Orinda. Following a presentation of the report at a well-attended community meeting held at Miramonte High School, a number of residents signed on to support the move toward becoming a city.

An incorporation committee, led by Jack Knebel, Marianne Aude, and Joyce Hawkins, was formed and the group decided to focus the incorporation effort on the four P's: police, planning, parks and recreation, and public works. With the incorporation mission defined, The Citizens to Preserve Orinda-a group comprised of about 25 core members and a

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number of additional supporters-set to work to promote incorporation to the rest of Orinda's residents. At this point Landers stepped down from her role as OA administrator and officially joined the cause. "We were asked to devote a year of our life to the incorporation cause," she says, adding with a laugh, "It turned out to be more like 18 months."

The Citizens to Preserve Orinda [CPO] used a variety of methods to reach the area's constituents and communicate their pro-incorporation message. "We held coffees and teas and tried to reach out to everyone we could," says Landers. CPO also created a video that presented the reasons why residents should consider change and support incorporation. Several copies of the video, in both VHS and Betamax formats, were made available to rent for free at the local video store that was then located in the Crossroads section of downtown. Orinda subsequently received national media attention for the incorporation film-one of the first videos used in a political campaign.

Although there was a faction of residents who were against the idea of incorporation, the move to cityhood was approved by Orinda voters in March of 1985. Fourteen Orindans ran for election to the five non-paying City Council posts on the same ballot. Joining Landers on the first City Council were Joe Harb, Bill Dabel, Aldo Guidotti, and Dick Heggie-Orinda's first mayor. At the inaugural ceremony held in the Community Center Nancy Fahden, who represented the district on the County Board of Supervisors, turned the key to the new city over to Heggie. Then serenaded by a bagpipe escort, the original five Council members marched out to the Community Park ready to make history. Orinda officially became a city on July 1st, 1985.

An interim city manager was appointed, an assistant was hired, and the City's staff of two was installed in the OA office. Although Dabel had served as the Public Works Director in Berkeley, the rest of the City Council members had limited experience with the workings of the public sector, so the learning curve for the group was steep, says Landers. "But it was an exciting time. People were motivated to volunteer and very, very positive," she says, quickly adding, "And it was always fun."

Lucy Hupp Williams and Carl Weber contributed to this article.

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