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## City Council Candidates Speak to Revenue and Infrastructure

By Andrea A. Firth

Orinda, like cities across the state of California, has struggled to generate sufficient revenue to cover expenses and preserve services which has forced the City Council to institute staff furlough days and reduce or eliminate funding to some programs over the past two years. Orinda's revenue problem is further confounded by significant infrastructure needs; specifically, road, storm drain, and water pipe repairs, which total an estimated \$100 million or more.

As part of the Lamorinda Weekly's ongoing election coverage, we asked the five candidates for Orinda's City Council to provide their answers to how to fix the City's money and road repair woes. We posed the following question: What do you feel the City Council should be doing over the next four years to address the City's revenue problem and significant infrastructure needs?

Here's what they had to say, in their own words.

Tom McCormick (Incumbent)

During the past four years, I have worked to fix our infrastructure problems of crumbling roads, failed storm drains, and inadequate fire-water pipes by doing the following:

Seeking Federal and State grants. We have obtained more than \$5 million in funds over the past few years to help pay for roads. Current road repairs in the Theatre District are being paid for with State grants.

Cutting city expenses to make more money available for infrastructure repairs.

Dedicating excess city reserves to road repairs.

Working in partnership with neighborhoods to repair roads. All creative ideas are acceptable.

Reviewing how Orinda's property tax dollars are spent to find money to fix roads and fire-water pipes to hydrants.

Completing repairs with city workers when possible so higher-cost outside vendors are not necessary.

Looking for less expensive and environmentally friendly alternatives. Moraga Way was repaved using grant money and used ground up tires mixed with road asphalt, which also resulted in a quieter road for neighboring homes.

Stop the State from taking Orinda's money-a yes vote on Proposition 23 is appropriate.

Dean Orr

As a Council Member, I will search for all possible sources of funding to fix our roads. While we are fortunate that our City does have a balanced budget, and that staff furloughs were not required this year, we do not have the revenue to adequately repair and maintain our roads and drains. I believe we must be fiscally conservative as we review and approve future budgets as State and Federal funding continues to be short and in some cases eliminated. We need to work together in a spirit of cooperation with other local agencies, the schools, utilities, and the fire district, in order to stretch our local taxpayer dollars and to make sure that our tax dollars stay at home and are not seized by the state.

We must address our failed roads and seek every funding opportunity to obtain revenue-including grant money, bonds, and partnering with the other involved agencies-like EBMUD, PG&E, and the Central Sanitary District-to find funds to fix our roads. In the short-term we must continue prioritizing road repairs from our limited budget. We must continue to look at alternate strategies for selecting road repair projects, sequencing of the work, and bundling of projects to take the best advantage of the construction bid process and stretch our dollars.

Sue Severson (Incumbent)

Property tax is the main revenue source for Orinda providing about half the annual operating budget of approximately \$11 million. Sales tax is the next largest revenue source at about 10 percent. Orinda has little control over the fact that both revenue sources are shrinking. The best options are to maintain a balanced budget by reducing expenses commensurate with revenue declines, and find new revenue sources. Last year, Orinda cut over \$500,000 from the budget, eliminating an administrative position and instituting furloughs. The City Council will again closely evaluate the budget midyear to determine if additional adjustments are needed.

In 2008, we formed a Finance Advisory Committee of citizen volunteers with financial expertise to advise on the budget and to generate ideas for revenue enhancement. I have been integrally involved in the process and we have identified a number of revenue enhancement options.

In the near term, however, with little budget relief in sight, the only way to address the significant infrastructure needs is to efficiently use every dollar designated for road and drain repair, maximize grant opportunities, partner with neighborhoods and utilities to complete work the City cannot fund, and seek community collaboration on solutions.

Amy Worth (Incumbent)

Through the City Council's careful budgeting and prudent use of tax dollars, Orinda has been able to maintain vital services even in these times of economic hardship. To maintain these services, Orinda will need to continue to be vigilant with expenses and through our strategic planning budget process, fund those services that are the highest priority for the community.

Improving our roads and drains must continue to be a high priority of the City's, and we must allocate the maximum city resources available to pave and repair roads and drains. Unfortunately, our revenues do not begin to approach the magnitude of the problem. By prioritizing the allocation of road paving dollars, instituting the neighborhood self-help paving program and an aggressive pothole repair program, we can repair and maintain the roads that have the highest use by Orinda residents. We must continue to allocate all our garbage franchise fees and regional transportation funds towards paving roads and actively seek state and federal road reconstruction grant funds, as we used to pave Moraga Way.

Now is not a good time to increase taxes, but Orinda will need to continue to explore future long term revenue options to repair and maintain our infrastructure.

Scott Zeller, MD

Thankfully, due to the strong work and foresight of Orinda's Finance Manager Emily Hobdy and City Manager Janet Keeter, the City's budget is balanced for the current fiscal year with no employee furloughs. But with a stagnant economy and decreasing tax proceeds, the City must aggressively seek new revenue opportunities to maintain our services and improve our infrastructure.

The roads clearly need repair, yet after two bond issues were defeated at the polls, our voters have said we need to look at alternatives to tax increases.

One possibility is exploring all possible avenues for government grants. Another consideration is shared-cost neighborhood assessments, as the Crestview Drive people have pioneered.

We should welcome and facilitate small businesses, which will improve our sales tax income. Orinda has somewhat of a reputation as being antagonistic to businesses. This must change.

In addition, we pay much more in tax dollars than Moraga does for our joint fire district. We should renegotiate to get Moraga to contribute their fair share, recapturing those monies towards our infrastructure-without jeopardizing our excellent fire services.

Regardless of the solution, we need to make the infrastructure repair a defined and untouchable part of our annual budget.

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