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Orinda Hosts Contra Costa Mayors Conference -- Lafayette's Tatzin named to LAFCO; Trotter named 2011 Conference Chair

By Lucy Amaral



California State Senator Mark DeSaulnier and Orinda Mayor Victoria Smith at the Contra Costa County Mayors Conference, held in Orinda. The Senator presented a legislative update to conference attendees.

Photo Lucy Amaral

The City of Orinda hosted mayors, council members and representatives from the Board of Supervisors from Contra Costa County as they gathered January 6 for their monthly Mayors Conference. The group meets regularly to discuss city issues and, this time, to make a number of committee appointments.

Newly elected council members and mayors were introduced including Council Member Dean Orr of Orinda, Mayor Carl Anduri of Lafayette, Mayor Karen Mendonca of Moraga and the City of Orinda's new mayor, Victoria Smith.

For this meeting, California State Senator Mark DeSaulnier was invited to present an overview of the upcoming state budget. After

offering a brief background on how the budget is divided and where California falls with regards to the rest of the country, DeSaulnier pulled no punches about the next few fiscal years. He outline a tough financial future with the possibility of education being hit hard and a 'realignment' of some service responsibilities put back to the city and county level.

"There is not a lot of good news," said DeSaulnier. "But the good news is that we are at a point where we have to confront our problems. We have the opportunity (to create) good fiscal policies and to monitor the outcome."

The gathering also included appointments to several key committees including the Contra Costa Transportation Authority (CCTA), the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) and the next chairperson for the 2011 Mayors Conference.

Hercules Mayor Ed Balico, citing family responsibilities and city challenges, withdrew his nomination to serve again on the CCTA. Balico has come under fire recently for financial and managerial issues regarding the running of the city of

Hercules. The council accepted the withdrawal and moved the selection process to the next meeting allowing for other nominees to come forward. Balico would go on to resign as Mayor of Hercules at the January 11 Hercules City Council meeting.

LAFCO is a regulatory agency charged by the state to oversee (among other items) the boundaries of cities, town and Special Districts (such as the Moraga Orinda Fire District), as well as water and sewer districts to ensure orderly growth. Four mayors were nominated to fill a vacant seat, but during the meeting two withdrew their requests. During the required roll call of attending mayors, Lafayette Council member Don Tatzin received the most votes, defeating Oakley Mayor Jim Frazier.

Moraga Council Member and current Vice Chair of the Mayors Conference, Dave Trotter, was selected to serve as the 2011 Mayors Conference Chairperson.

The next Mayors Conference will be held February 3 in Richmond. Lafayette will host this conference in June of this year, and Moraga is scheduled to host in July.

Gold Coast Celebrates Black History

By Lou Fancher



Photo provided by Pamela Freund-Striplin

The Gold Coast Chamber Players are using their first performances of 2011 to prove they've got both talent and a desire to celebrate Black History Month.

The ensemble's performances, held in the Community Hall at the Lafayette Library, will feature Lawrence Beamen, a top finalist from television's America's Got Talent, and works by Antonin Dvorak and William Grant Still.

Pamela Freund-Striplin, the Gold Coast Chamber Players' (GCCP) artistic director, described the evolution of this year's special event.

"My son went through the school system here and I noticed they always did activities around Black History month. I saw he was participating through the schools, but there were no public events to celebrate the month."

She began to form a plan for a concert, and heard some surprising responses:

"Someone asked me recently, 'Why are you doing this: you're not black!' It never occurred to me that it didn't have something to do with all of us. And then, after it started developing, I thought how cool it would be to have related events. I thought it would enrich the whole concert to have a variety of things around Black History month."

Her idea had a snowball effect on library staff. Kathy Merchant,

Executive Director of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation, reported that the Consortium Partners are gearing up for related activities, and Mayor Carl Anduri is brushing up a proclamation for the City Council's consideration.

"Our children's librarian, Donna Lenhardt, is pulling together a program with a woman who appears as Harriet Tubman, asking the children to follow her much like Harriet did for escaping slaves. The Chabot Space and Science Discovery Center is doing a program for ages 3-8 on the great African American inventor Washington Carver. The children will play a game that matches the name of the invention to a picture of the invention, will plant a peanut seedling, and will make their own peanut butter, then have it as a snack," she said.

Freund-Striplin, pleased with the expansion, was also thrilled with the contributions Beamen made to the project.

"My original idea was to pair Dvorak's American String Quartet and some spirituals. But once Lawrence became involved, it became a larger project. He has a lot of ideas about Black History Month. I think that's what drew him to say yes. The ideas behind it were more than just hiring him to do some singing," she said.

Not that the singing wouldn't be enough. Beamen knew he

wanted to be a singer from his early days growing up in Mississippi. Hear him sing just one line of Old of Man River and there's little doubt he was born to deliver rich, vibrant renditions of the historically significant American songs.

"A good voice is a given in my world, but what I look at is how can they show me a new universe with what they sing," Freund-Striplin said. "The spirituals require an understanding of the text. I wanted a singer that could communicate the optimism and suffering that I hear in the African American spirituals."

Freund-Striplin said she has heard some of the best voices in the world through her work with the San Francisco Opera, but Beamen's deep, resonant sound told a story beyond the meaning of the lyrics.

"The songs are from Africa, there are folk songs, and songs from Israel. It's useful that he is African American in understanding where this music comes from: he grew up in Mississippi, he learned these songs from his grandfather, there's a history there that brings a richer experience than someone who learned it as an adult," she explained.

The ensemble's concerts often feature a slide show with information about the music and the composers. This time, Beamen will give contextual information about the spirituals and their connection to

Dvorak's work. Dvorak came to America in 1892 to identify the "American musical voice." History shows that he so loved the actual voice of young Harry Burleigh, a singer he discovered, that he asked the boy to sing to him almost daily. The composer came to believe African American spirituals were at the heart of American music.

William Grant Still, whose Panamanian Dances Freund-Striplin described as "lively, with percussive things we do on the instruments," was the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra.

Freund-Striplin hopes the concerts are not a one-time event. The performances will be broadcast on KQED four times in February and the group has an education program that takes them to the schools throughout the year.

"We play all over the Bay area," Freund-Striplin said, "but I always want to have a community base for the Gold Coast Concert Players. We're hopeful that we will do this—or something similar—every year for Black History month."

The Gold Coast Chamber Players
Harmony and Melody
Sat., January 29 at 7:30pm
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