



**Independent, locally owned and operated!**

[www.lamorindaweekly.com](http://www.lamorindaweekly.com) 925-377-0977

Published October 8th, 2014

## An Enlightening Forum

*By Sophie Braccini*

The now-traditional Moraga Citizens Network Candidates Night brought the three candidates for town council together at the Holy Trinity Cultural Center on Oct. 1. Ken Chew, Teresa Onoda and David Trotter responded to questions posed by their prospective constituency, offering insight to who they are and what they stand for. Questions on issues such as land use and recreation were expected, and the candidates' answers can be found in their publicity materials; but a few unanticipated questions garnered unscripted responses. As the forum proceeded, commonalities between Trotter and Onoda emerged. With only two seats open on the council, the November election in Moraga may be shaping up to be a tight race.

It was a bit of an uphill battle for Onoda. A teacher and artist with less than two years of experience on the Moraga Planning Commission, she had difficulty asserting her knowledge of the town's affairs against two veteran council members, Chew and Trotter, who are both running for third terms. Onoda's candidacy is based on her belief that the town is at a tipping point; the Moraga Center Specific Plan allows too many new homes and condominiums and will lead to developments that are out of character with the town. While she did not offer an immediate strategy to revise the plan or negotiate with property owners, she highlighted her desire to study the issues at a deeper level. As incumbents, Chew and Trotter have played large roles in recent political decisions. They approved the Moraga Center Specific Plan and both feel that the town has mechanisms and rules to control the type of growth that will happen in the downtown. But on many questions, each expressed views that were quite different from the other.

Development, the predominant issue of the evening, includes construction on ridgelines. Onoda and Trotter both believe the town should make it clear that protecting ridgelines means preserving them and not allowing development, and that a minimum height of 800 feet is not necessarily the only criteria for protection. Trotter pointed to his consistent record of advocating this position.

Taking a more cautious approach, Chew indicated that he would wait for the hillside and ridgeline subcommittee, which is currently reviewing the regulations, to present its recommendations.

A question of whether or not property owners should have veto power over the designation of a site as a historic landmark was also contentious. In Chew's view, property owners should be given the final say. Onoda, who supported a veto for property owners as a planning commissioner, said that the Rheem Theatre being for sale changes things, and she would now withhold that power. Trotter also opposes a property owner veto.

A question about the town's relationship with Saint Mary's College resulted in a love fest for SMC as the candidates tried to outdo each other as to who is the bigger fan of the institution and has the deepest relationship with it, although Trotter noted that the college also has a responsibility toward the town and referenced a dispute that has emerged with neighbors over the lighting of a sports field, which the council will adjudicate.

In the election four years ago, Trotter won 37.46 percent of votes and Chew 33.78 percent. Three other candidates ran that year-the next highest vote count went to Seth Freeman, with 16.4 percent of votes, who was very critical of the incumbents. This year Trotter and Onoda seem to be closely aligned and recently met jointly with residents. This new political dynamic adds a different flavor to the process and could lead to a closer race.

Lamorinda Weekly recorded the debate, which can be viewed online at [www.lamorindaweekly.com](http://www.lamorindaweekly.com) and [www.moragacitizensnetwork.org](http://www.moragacitizensnetwork.org).

**Fire District Candidates Open the Show**

Before the city council Q&A session, each candidate for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District Division 1 seat delivered a prepared three-minute speech.

Nathan Bell, a professional equity manager, stressed that his financial background was his top qualification for taking over the seat. He explained that the main reason he is running is because the district has taken in \$250 million in gross receipts since its inception in 1997, yet it carries a

\$90 million deficit.

"MOFD is in peril," he said. "It needs to be financially sound."

Incumbent Kathleen Famulener, who has worked in the Alameda County district attorney's office for 37 years, said that she shared the district's financial concerns.

"But we have made progress in my year on the board," she said. "We hired a new fire chief, we've increased seasonal staffing, we negotiated a 4-year contract with the firefighters, and we've reduced the district unfunded health care liability from \$28 million to \$16.9 million." -N. Marnell

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

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA