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## Orinda City Council Candidates Discuss the Importance of Engagement

By Laurie Snyder

"Democracy is not a spectator sport." - Lotte Scharfman

Attributed to a refugee from Nazi-occupied Austria who became president of the Massachusetts League of Women Voters, those words eloquently sum up Orinda's 2014 elections. With six candidates running for city council, Orindans are mulling options in ways many haven't since Orinda's incorporation. It was with those words in mind that this newspaper interviewed the six regarding the importance of elected officials dialoguing not just with constituents, but with the larger entities impacting Orinda's quality of life.

"I think Orindans want a voice; however, we need to be cautious," said Linda Delehunt regarding relations with the solid waste authority, Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) and similar groups. "We need to be sure we're not engaging in conflicts of interest." When officials "accept positions where they have conflicts of interest, they cannot fulfill their job responsibilities properly. I think that's been one of the problems. Conflicts of interest do exist within the ranks of our city council." Delehunt, who ran for Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools in June, first ran for the city council in 2012.

"There's a question of whether these regional entities make sense, but because they're there, they're making decisions affecting Orinda. So it's important to have representation," said business executive Eve Phillips. But, she said, there is a danger when Orinda and regional goals conflict. In a recent forum, she said Orinda has "seen high density buildings going up to satisfy state and regional pressures while a former gem of our downtown has remained vacant. BART capacity and parking have only gotten worse." She feels Orinda should assess the tradeoffs of disregarding such mandates, and supports "local control in a semi-rural environment to support our schools, our streets and our residents."

"You're talking to somebody with a degree in city and regional planning," said former Orinda Planning Commission chair Carlos Baltodano, who said he views planning from local and larger perspectives. "We're part of the region; we're surrounded by highways. We can't divorce ourselves. These regional bodies are making decisions about Orinda and the cities surrounding us, and are making impacts on infrastructure, housing. We can either not be involved or be at the table, making changes on behalf of our citizens to ensure that the regional choices being made will impact Orinda in a positive way."

"It's extraordinarily important. We don't live in a vacuum here," said Bob Thompson, who has been a member of Orinda's Finance Advisory Committee since its inception. "We live between Oakland and Walnut Creek. If you're not on or liaison to these regional bodies, you don't have a voice at the table." Thompson stressed that he very much favors city council members continuing to serve in liaison roles to the various regional boards which have the power to impact everything in Orinda from air quality to the availability of water during severe drought conditions.

"It's vital, as residents of a smaller community, to have effective representation on boards that affect the lives of our residents - whether transportation dollars or with child safety and the Lamorinda School Bus Program," said Councilmember Amy Worth, who has chaired the Contra Costa Transportation Authority and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. "Because of our joint powers with the county's solid waste authority, for example, we provide better services for lower rates than other towns. We can't do it alone. We need to build alliances."

"If we don't participate in ABAG, then what? We still have a regional housing allocation number but we aren't at the table to get critical information," said Councilmember Dean Orr. Collaboration also matters because Orinda may need federal or state help when an emergency occurs - like Napa did during the recent earthquake. "We won't get it just with outreach by a mayor. That's why people decided nearly 30 years ago to incorporate. We weren't getting respect

from Martinez; we couldn't control our planning or emergency services."

Another example is the Caldecott Tunnel's new fourth bore. Lamorindans have been reporting reduced stress levels since the November 2013 opening, saying they feel safer and can better predict how long commutes will take. Caltrans research backs this up. Drivers now average 10-15 minutes less in travel time. That may not sound like much, but when considering the corridor's average traffic load - 160,000 drivers daily - multiplied by the minutes saved per person times the number of days driven per week by each driver, it's a huge decrease in time and environmental impact.

But the new bore didn't just happen. Since county voters' 1988 approval of a half-cent sales tax and CCTA formation to oversee those funds, area city councils have worked with larger agencies to prioritize the initiative above other cities' projects, resulting in \$38 million in initial state funding, \$50 million via Regional Measure 2, \$125 million via 2004's Measure J, and a \$197 million federal stimulus in 2009.

"It's very difficult to do planning with a capital 'P' with just a local approach," explained Orr. If you make a fix to Highway 24, you may solve a problem at St. Stephens - but if you don't think about how that fix impacts the tunnel, you may make the problem worse. You can't do this sort of thing in a vacuum. That's not planning. It's problem solving."

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