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Orinda's Planning Director Steps Down

By Victor Ryerson



Emmanuel Ursu at a Housing Element workshop last year. Photo Ohlen Alexander

Emmanuel Ursu has resigned after serving nearly 15 years as Orinda's planning director. His resignation was effective Sept. 18, and he was recognized by the City Council on Sept. 15 for his long years of service and contribution to the community.

Ursu came to Orinda in November 2000 from the consulting world with the intention of staying "for five years, tops," he says, but was seduced by the challenges of the top planning spot in the relatively new community. His tenure expanded to three times what he had planned as he found the experience to be the "great, rewarding time of (his) career." He has lived in Orinda for 14 of those years.

Ursu came onboard at a time when the city was at a turning point in its history, and he regards the big projects he took over in his early years as perhaps his greatest accomplishments. Among these are the renegotiation of the development agreement governing Wilder (then Montanera) in the Gateway Valley, which had already had a troubled history of local opposition and financial failure. With the renegotiated agree-

ment in place and the Environmental Impact Report approved by 2005, development of the project could proceed.

He also points to his role in the development of the civic buildings and downtown housing projects as a major achievement. When he arrived, the old Orinda Library site was to be used for construction of the new City Hall. Ursu persuaded then city manager Bill Lindsay that the site would be better used for senior affordable housing, resulting in relocation of City Hall to its current site and the construction of an award-winning senior housing development in the original location. Simultaneously, the Orinda School District surplused the old Pine Grove site vacated by JFK University, and Ursu put together a development plan and policies that would devote that site in large part to housing, including eight below-market units targeted for school district employees. All of these new buildings, as well as smaller residential subdivisions on Stein Way, Lavenida Way, and prospectively around the old Moraga Adobe, bear witness to his work in reshaping Orinda.

"It has been quite a ride," he told the council members during their farewell ceremony. As for Orinda's future, Ursu says the biggest ongoing challenge is maintaining and enhancing Orinda's environment, balancing the quality of its new homes against the General Plan mandate to maintain its semi-rural character. "Change is inevitable," he says, and this aspect of the job will never end.

The biggest item of unfinished business, in his opinion, is Orinda's downtown. "There is really ... tremendous opportunity to enhance" the downtown experience, he says, with additional opportunities for shopping and other activities. He hopes this will become the focus of the City Council for the next two years.

Ursu's own future will probably involve going back into consulting work, although he does not rule out an eventual return to public service. In the meantime, Victor Camiglia of Municipal Resource Group will serve as Orinda's interim planning director while the city conducts a search for Ursu's full-time replacement.

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