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Mayor Onoda wants to appoint Moraga's own poet laureate

By *Sophie Braccini*

Suddenly there is plethora of projects in Lamorinda to appoint a poet laureate.

The Lamorinda Arts Council (LAC) has proposed to appoint a laureate who would write poems for events and conduct poetry education. But Moraga Mayor Teresa Onoda wants the town to have its own laureate, as part of an exclusive partnership with Saint Mary's College.

What is a poet laureate? According to the dictionary, it is "a poet appointed to, or regarded unofficially as holding, an honorary representative position in a particular country, region, or group." Juan Felipe Herrera is the current U.S. poet laureate.

LAC's idea emerged a few years back as a way to design a program that would promote the literary arts locally. "We have a lot of initiatives to promote visual and performing arts," says LAC's president Lawrence Kohl. "Our project is to include poetry in major functions, and also to be a focal point to encourage community involvement in poetry, popcorn poetry for kids, workshops, so poetry can become a part of the community." He adds that it is also a cool way to celebrate a local poet, as Lamorinda houses several published poets.

Onoda has a different idea. As she explained it during the Arts in Public Spaces Committee meeting on May 9, what she wants is an exclusive partnership between Moraga and Saint Mary College to appoint a poet laureate. In the mayor's vision, the laureate would not be compensated, but would be given an office at the Hacienda de las Flores for writing. At that time she was not sure if the person chosen would be a student or a professor, or what the extent of their function would be.

At the meeting Onoda made it clear that this was an important personal project of hers. She told the art committee that Jim Donahue, president of Saint Mary's College, had told her that he wanted this Moraga-Saint Mary's project to come to fruition.

A member of LAC who had come to the May 9 meeting explained that the objective was to have Moraga be part of the project. Lafayette and Orinda have already approved it and LAC has raised funds to give the laureate a stipend. LAC proposed to have Saint Mary's be a part of the review committee that would choose the laureate.

But the mayor would not hear it. For her Saint Mary's College is in Moraga, it makes the town special and should not be shared with Orinda and Lafayette, she said.

The arts council followed the mayor's lead. Just one member abstained indicating that looking into a Lamorinda partnership would make sense since there does not seem to be that many opportunities for Moraga alone to occupy a poet laureate.

The council meeting will make a final decision most likely at a June meeting. In the proposed text, the mayor could have the power to appoint the poet without a vote of the council.

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[back](#)

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