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Orinda's new mayor has legislative agenda



Photo Sora O'Doherty

Darlene Gee, new Mayor of Orinda

By Sora O'Doherty

Stepping up from vice mayor to mayor of Orinda on Dec. 13, with, as she put it, the most experienced vice mayor, Amy Worth, in the history of Orinda, Darleen Gee has decided that she has four key priorities during her year as

mayor.

Gee is keen to renew and perhaps expand the local sales tax that is about to expire in 2023. She explains that the sales tax is a general tax that requires a simple voter majority, as opposed to a required two-thirds majority vote, and the council is allowed to use the revenues from a sales tax however it wishes. Orinda has chosen to use the sales tax to update its roads, but it is not obligated to use it for that purpose. Because of the upcoming expiration of the current tax, there are only two possible elections in which to pass a new tax, November 2020 and November 2022. Gee would like the voters to at least renew the current half-cent sales tax, and perhaps raise it to one cent. Gee and Vice Mayor Worth are on the subcommittee on tax and revenue.

Gee's second priority is to update the downtown development standards. The team has been working hard, and has issued a request for proposals to develop the standards, which, Gee says, is the next big step in the process of downtown development.

The new mayor's third priority is the construction of the mini-park at the entrance to the Theatre District from the Highway 24 exit. "I really

care about that," Gee said. "The Orinda Community Foundation has been so generous," she added. She hopes to see construction bids this year.

Fourth, Gee wants to explore the possibility of Orinda becoming a charter city, as opposed to its current status as a general law city. "One reason to do that," Gee explained, "is to raise funds with a real estate transfer tax," but that is not her driving motivation. She has two key reasons for exploring the status change: greater local control and the ability to impose much more serious penalties for code infractions.

Local control has to do with the housing situation. She cites a San Mateo lawsuit, in which that city prevailed over a state of California demand for denser housing. The judge, Gee said, ruled for the city because it is a charter city. However, Gee acknowledged that the situation is very messy, and is likely to be very fluid over the next five years. El Cerrito recently converted to a charter city, and Gee will be having a meeting with the

mayor of that city soon.

All members of the Orinda City Council are volunteers, and Gee spends at least 10 hours a week on council work, in addition to holding a full-time job. She said that she was especially proud of Orinda after the tragic shooting on Halloween. After the incident, Gee said, she was in shock, as the mass shooting at an Airbnb home rented for a party was so unusual, so out of character for Orinda. At the following city council meeting, she said, Orinda residents came out to express their point of view "so eloquently, with no one screaming, no one disrespectful." It seemed, she said, "so refreshing and so old-fashioned."

The city council, Gee noted, "is very collegial and gets things done." In fact, she added, "we've been accused of being too in sync." But she stressed that she believes in compromise, in pushing things forward, and getting things done. She has a year ahead to do just that.

An article outlining Vice Mayor Amy Worth's goals will be in the next issue.

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