

# Letters to the editor

## COVID-19 and our business community

Like every city in every country in the world, we find ourselves at a “tipping point” where our actions will dictate our future. Change in the road ahead is imminent. How will we face down this pandemic is still ours to decide! Our business community has become a vital part of the fabric of life in Lafayette. Convenience, variety, and a preference to “small business” has made our downtown vibrant and fun. Many of these same merchants who know you by name, support your schools and causes and provide commerce in a local setting are at the brink of losing everything. Their businesses, their homes, their savings are all at stake.

Sound local leadership closed many of our businesses in the spring to stop the spread of COVID-19. And merchants took one for the team when they closed, and then did everything possible to reopen successfully. Our inability to keep this virus under control boils down to misleading information, a sense of invincibility, ignorance and Bad Behavior. We must do the “right thing” and flatten the curve. The only way to do that is to be more diligent in wearing masks, washing hands, social distance and staying at home when possible. What’s good for our businesses is good for us. Collecting sales tax is so important to the health of our city. Sales Tax pays for police services, public works, and many of the other services you have come to expect in Lafayette. Every business has the right to refuse service, as long as it is not discriminatory. No Mask- No Service.

One city. One push. We can do this! Let us be leaders in the fight against the virus. 25,000 people, wearing masks, keeping social distancing, and helping

keep our merchants in business. Stop the spread of rumors. Know the facts [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). Get Tested!

- WEAR A MASK
- PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING
- STAY AT HOME WHEN POSSIBLE

It’s not complicated, yet it’s imperative. Lafayette has always been a community that gets it! A little sacrifice now means a lot less sacrifice later.

Jay Lifson  
Executive Director, Lafayette Chamber of Commerce

### Happy Trails

Here we go again! Another group of homeowners is fighting the establishment of a trail or trail-head [“Outcry over proposed trail staging area...”, *Lamorinda Weekly*, Wednesday, July 22]. In this case, it’s the residents of Wilder.

Those residents fear that the establishment of a staging area will lead to the increase of unwanted, illegal, dangerous activity. Their fears are real, but let’s look at the history of previous similar situations in Lamorinda. The residents of Lafayette, particularly those on Moraga Blvd., whose back yards abut the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Trail, fought the trail over similar concerns. When the Lafayette-Moraga Trail was extended to the Valle Vista Staging Area, residents of Moraga Country Club and residents on School Street—mostly those whose back yards were on the other side of the creek from the trail—fought that trail out of fear that burglars would be able to scope out their homes for later thefts. When Orinda’s St. Stephens Trail was under consideration, the residents above the trail were concerned that potential burglars would be able to snoop on their

properties. All of those groups also feared that the presence of more people on the trails would bring noise and litter, as well as more dangerous activities. None of those fears were realized. In fact, time and time again, it has been shown that the mere presence of law-abiding citizens actually discourages illicit activity.

Stan Oberg  
Moraga

### Thumbs Up for Downtown Momentum

In a landscape of doom and gloom for much 2020 thus far, there is a glimmer of positivity on the horizon. The City of Orinda has been slowly plugging away at a revised Downtown Precise Plan (DPP) that will address at long last a decades old conversation about how to thoughtfully modernize Orinda’s Downtown district. Much work has been done to identify ‘existing conditions’ including current zoning, land usage and structures and Orinda’s DPP would update the City’s downtown development standards and create objective design standards for multi-family residential and mixed-use projects.

This update is necessary on many levels. First, it will help Orinda attract high level development which will in turn entice an attractive mix of new businesses and increase vitality in our Downtown District. Secondly, it will allow Orinda to make decisions on how to incorporate housing into our Downtown district in a thoughtful way that is in keeping with the City’s unique personality and aesthetic. It is no longer a question of whether Orinda needs to update and change to allow for modernization and revitalization, but how we will do so on our own terms. Applause to our City

Planning Department and City Council for diving in and doing the work to keep the future of Orinda’s Downtown in the hands of Orinda’s citizens for generations to come!

Kirsten Larsen  
(Representing the What’s Up Downtown Orinda Steering Committee)

### Voice your opinion on downtown development in Orinda

Amid all that is wrong in the world these days, the visual cacophony of downtown Orinda is at the bottom of a very long list. But it is something we can change by offering ideas and opinions as the City Council takes steps toward encouraging the private property owners to renew and redevelop our dowdy commercial district.

The new façade at 43 Moraga Way is an inspiring bright spot, a hint of how charming the street could appear. Meetings on Aug. 18 and 26 are opportunities for all Orindans to ask questions and express concerns. (Details on Orinda’s website.) Please encourage our city officials to proceed with necessary changes to the existing design standards, so that in a calmer future, carefully considered improvement plans are ready to get underway.  
Barbara Bennett  
Orinda

### Lafayette litigation and Brown Act

I read with dismay the misleading spin placed by Lafayette officials on the conclusion of litigation brought by Lafayette residents concerning the city’s violation of public open meeting laws, commonly referred to as the Brown Act. The city pretended it was exonerated and that residents were to blame for the city’s resulting litigation costs. That is false.

Instead of the Lafayette City Council holding a new hearing and spending nothing, they spent \$936,000 on some of the Bay Area’s most expensive lawyers litigating their Brown Act open meeting violation. While residents did not obtain all of the relief they requested, they proved that the city had violated the law. The California Court of Appeal ruled the city council’s closed sessions “violated the Brown Act” and the “statutory scheme does not allow an agency to thwart its duty of public disclosure in this manner.” The city must now disclose with its public agenda litigation statements that are scheduled for closed session.

The Lafayette community should be outraged. Four current Council members were not involved in the original decision, but they should demand an immediate review of the City Attorney who allowed the Brown Act violations and advocated litigation instead of correction. This is not the first time the City Attorney has endorsed such violations. Perhaps wasting taxpayer money doesn’t mean much to the city, as long as it can pretend to blame residents whose position the city violated open meeting laws was confirmed by the court.

Eliot Hudson  
Lafayette

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# PG&E reports on PSPS plans – council and community remain skeptical

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The letter also addressed the “major safety concern” of the manually operated shut-off valves situated roughly one mile into Briones past locked gates, and several miles from downtown Lafayette – something the Gas Safety Task Force has repeatedly directed attention to.

And the LHC also questioned the lack of report on October’s fire. “No report after ten months?” the letter asks.  
Contra Costa County Fire

Protection District Assistant Chief William Pigeon noted its own review done right after the incident showed it was caused by downed power lines.

“I don’t feel any more assured after hearing what PG&E had to say because we heard the same assurances last year,” said Michael Dawson of the GSTF addressing the council to make comment. He said he would like to have more local information such as about the downed power pole.  
“If PG&E knew within 24

hours that this was something they caused, to now stumble and bumble and say maybe we have a cause, maybe we don’t, just seems disingenuous,” said Dawson, adding he was glad they would be getting a report.

Dawson also said he’d been told by residents along St. Mary’s Road where PG&E is engaging in vegetation management tree cutting, that a PG&E employee had threatened the homeowner who refused to allow the tree cutting on their property, saying if they didn’t allow the utility to

take down the tree the homeowner would have to pay the full cost of removal themselves if needed at a later date, which Dawson said was false.

Guarino took great exception to that, saying that he sincerely doubted any PG&E employee had done that, but that he would want to hear about it if it had taken place.

The discussion became more inflammatory as both Candell and Council Member Cam Burks defended Dawson. “You’re calling him a liar,” said

Candell.  
“Our town almost burned down because of you,” said Burks. “There is zero trust between Lafayette and PG&E,” he said, adding, “We are getting close to a real critical time and last year the example you set was an F.”

Mayor Mike Anderson ended the discussion, noting that the audits will be helpful and that they want to move in the right direction but he also warned, “Let’s not diminish the concerns of the public.”

# Racism, discrimination discussion; city leaders listening



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A survey was done before the meeting that collected over two dozen experiences – including those of discrimination based on religion, gen-

der identity and race – and ideas for change from the public, either given anonymously or with a name, which is available on the city website. It relates stories of discrimination in the com-

munity, in the schools, and from the police.

And it also has the opinion of a few who say there is no such thing as racism in Lafayette.  
Vice Mayor Susan Can-

dell, chair of the Task Force to Effect Change and Action in the Area of Racial Equality in Lafayette commented after the meeting: “I know that we are all at different places on the spectrum of understanding racism in its many forms, and some likely still believe that we don’t have any racist issues in our city, but I hope that last night you heard enough to move yourself on that spectrum.”

Candell says she is especially thankful “to all of the very brave people who shared their stories with us involving racism in our city.”

Task Force Vice Chair Council Member Cam Burks said at the meeting it was clear there was a “swift undercurrent of racism in our

town.”  
According to the city, there will be another town hall meeting on racial equality held on Aug. 20. Details will be available on the city website.

Candell promised there would be action in the near future, and that any recommendations arising from these listening sessions will be taken back to the full council for approval.

“I look forward to working with our task force members, staff, and our full city council on our journey towards a more welcome and just city for all who live, work, or visit Lafayette,” said Candell, adding, “I know we can become a better community for all.”

# Cal Shakes cuts costs and moves staff to Orinda

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While shop space, rehearsal space and storage space is missing, Williams says the company is lucky to have a production space located outside. She knows that in the age of social distancing Cal Shakes may have to adapt its model and rescale production with fewer patrons at a given time.

Williams is very concerned for the artists and technicians in the community whose benefits ended at the end of July; she does not know how some of them will survive. Cal Shakes is implementing several ideas to put

some cash in their hands. The first program was Mystery Shakespeare Theater 1592 where artists provided live commentary for a small stipend. The company is looking at more funding to playwrights and artists who are creating work relevant to this moment. Cal Shakes is also thinking about how to utilize the outdoor space, such as the eucalyptus grove that has many picnic tables interspaced at a large distance to accommodate movie nights, presentations, or lectures.

Meanwhile, the company is offering an online 10-week

in-depth dive into Shakespeare with Cal Shakes’ resident dramaturg Dr. Philippa Kelly. “Hamlet,” “King Lear,” “Julius Caesar,” “Measure for Measure,” and “The Taming of the Shrew” are on the syllabus. Kelly will explore the vital question: what makes these plays so potent for the moment we are living in right now? Each play’s exploration includes two one-hour classes on Tuesday nights and one one-hour Saturday study session, for the price of \$60 per play. Classes began Aug. 4 on Zoom.

Williams says that there is no precise end in sight for

the crisis, the industry has been hit to its core and it is going to be a very long recovery process.

For more information, visit [calshakes.org](http://calshakes.org).

## Town Hall Theatre cuts staff

Town Hall Theatre’s board decided to eliminate the artistic director position from its permanent staff list and Susan Evans, who had held that position for three years, was let go. Dennis Markam, the managing director is one of the three paid staff left with the production manager and development director. The director of education was not replaced. Markam explained that the situation was not sustainable and that the theater company will be reinventing itself in the coming weeks/months. The current staff and volunteer board members will conduct outreach to the community in the near future to evaluate its theatrical needs.