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Orinda city council candidates respond to questions

By Sora O'Doherty



Darlene Gee



Inga Miller



Latika Malkani

The Lamorinda Weekly posed three questions to the three candidates vying for seats on the Orinda city council, incumbents Mayor Darlene Gee, council member Inga Miller, and challenger Latika Malkani.

Lamorinda Weekly on Diversity: Orinda is a wealthy city with a limited amount of ethnic and racial diversity. And yet, Orinda residents are very concerned about being inclusive to all. Do you have ideas about how the City Council can promote increased diversity, or if it in fact should be concerned with that?

Candidates:

According to Malkani, "In the last few years, my competitors have either rejected or taken no action to implement many simple, practical, resident suggestions, including an Orinda 'City Day' focused on celebrating

diversity, an official city proclamation that 'All Are Welcome Here' with resident-provided signs visibly posted on city windows, an implicit bias training for staff and councilmembers, and a resident review committee to oversee and review police practices that includes all stakeholders (concerned residents, the Police Chief, the police unions, and others)," she said. Malkani suggested many innovative ways to foster an inclusive culture while also promoting other city values, such as educating our children, supporting local business and creating more vibrant downtown spaces. Post-COVID, she said that she would like to see the city partner with local businesses and restaurants - like our landmark Orinda Theatre - to host a speaker or art series showcasing presenters of color. "Orinda's residents are brilliant and generous volunteers, so why not create (as other cities have done) a city committee to recommend and help implement social justice policies and events? The possibilities are exciting and endless, so let's act to value diversity and inclusion."

Gee, however, said that the council did adopt a proclamation in September 2019 on these important issues and that it should remain the guiding framework for actions that reflect this statement of values. She pointed out that, outside of direct employees of the city or appointees to committees and commissions, diversity happens through the process of growth, change and the mix of residents who choose to live in Orinda. In her term as mayor, Gee is proud that the city has taken important steps to create a more welcoming and equitable community, including initiated dialogue with the Orinda Union School District. The city has also, Gee said, taken multiple actions toward ensuring positive community policing, and she vowed to continue to build on this progress.

She added things that the city can and should be doing to foster respect and positive community experience include ensuring that city staff and police have the training and knowledge to conduct their community interactions at the highest level of best practice and respect, reviewing performance at regular intervals; having adequate means of receiving direct community feedback about problem interactions, as well as having adequate city council and public oversight to ensure corrective actions are promptly implemented. She also espoused ensuring that public facilities reflect and honor diversity, including artwork, parks, buildings and streetscape.

Miller said that she has been saddened by the stories she has recently heard from her neighbors who have experienced racism and feel unwelcome in Orinda. In an effort to embrace Orindans who unbeknownst to so many of us have felt marginalized in our midst, Miller said, "we have opened a public dialogue about policing, which includes steps that the police department has taken and continues to take to avoid implicit bias in policing in Orinda and to improve transparency in police business." Miller added that as a former newspaper reporter she is committed to striving for improved transparency and also to maintain public confidence that the Orinda city council is working to continue to make Orinda safe.

Lamorinda Weekly on private roads: Approximately 20% of Orinda residents live on private roads. That being said, the private roads arose from very different sources, some were inherited by the city when it incorporated in 1985, some have been the product of deals done with the city in order to bring new residential developments to the city. Private road residents have become much more vocal, especially since the Miner Road sinkhole disaster. Do you have any ideas about how to satisfy residents of both public and private roads in the future?

Candidates: Gee has been the city council member most obviously sympathetic to the plight of residents of private roads. She believes that ultimately all Orinda roads desiring inclusion should be included in the City public system. "While most cities have some private roads," she said, "the scale and history of Orinda's situation is very unusual." While she believes that Orinda's patchwork system often results in time and costs

to the city that she believes waste resources, she also acknowledges that there are very real costs to adding private roads and drains to the public network that the community at large would need to be willing to share in some manner. Gee recommends a number of steps, the first being to again revise Orinda Resolution 59-18. Gee notes that she was the only "no" vote in 2018 when the city council "took action to make it virtually impossible to adopt private roads into the public system." Second would be to ascertain which private roads want to remain private. Third would be a field survey of the private road conditions by the city, excluding Wilder and the Pulte developments because they are so new as to already be rated in excellent condition, conducted in the same manner as the public roads.

Gee wants to establish an accurate cost estimate of bringing the private roads up to good to excellent condition - recognizing any extraordinary costly issues such as landslides, failing structures, unusual drainage etc., initiating a city-led pilot program for incrementally bringing the private roads to a condition where they could be adopted under a revised Resolution 59-18 - starting with about 8 to 10 miles of older roads that had previously been offered but not accepted as public roads by the county.

Gee believes that the city needs to evaluate a fair methodology for how costs might be shared to bring the road to a condition that it could be transferred into the public system. "For example," she says, "private road residents should be credited for the garbage truck impact fees they pay but are not able to use toward their road maintenance, but the public should not be unfairly burdened with road maintenance issues private road residents may have ignored for years.

Private roads should be added to in stages so the city can plan to take on the additions from a legal and workload standpoint as well as ensure the ongoing maintenance costs are

incorporated into future funding plans." The city should also allow any new future developments or subdivisions to allow public roads from the beginning. Additionally, Gee believes that infrastructure should be community asset that is shared by the residents for the benefits of all, not as a liability to be argued over.

Miller agrees that the city's policy on private roads needs revision. "I believe the city should hold a public meeting to hear whether residents as a whole believe we should lower the standard - perhaps to the average condition of existing roads in Orinda - and whether we should have more flexibility in cases in which there is significant public benefit to the community." However she sees the adoption of private roads to be a very expensive endeavor that would displace other items in the city's capital improvement plan.

Miller gave an example of a resident who lives on a private road that terminates at a walking trail, serving as a significant shortcut from a hillside between Orinda Woods and Camino Sobrante to the Orinda Village, who said that many more people in North Orinda could walk to Orinda Village on city right of way if the private road was made public. Miller suggested that this might be a significant public benefit and might warrant the city investing in some or all of the cost of road and drainage infrastructure to bring the road up to city standards in exchange for the access this road would then provide pedestrians.

Malkani, on private roads, said, "There are some rules, but often there is no rhyme or reason why some Orinda roads are public while others remain private." She understands that many private road residents perceive an inequity, and have requested a low-cost study on the extent of needed repairs. From there, she says, "I can't tell you exactly what the long-term solution looks like because it would need to address revenue generation, cost sharing, and conversion of private to public roads," but adds, "What I can tell you is that the city can't continue to ignore this complicated mess and hope it goes away - the study is a reasonable step to understanding the scope of this problem."

Lamorinda Weekly on Downtown Development: Orinda's downtown has been pretty static since the development of Theatre Square expansion in 1989, over 30 years ago. Given the pressure to build housing coming from the State legislature, what are your goals for the redevelopment of Orinda's downtown?

Candidates: Council Member Miller is one of the two members of the Downtown Subcommittee. She has met with city leaders in San Luis Obispo to learn how they have protected their creek while providing opportunities for Creekside dining.

"The Thursday night Food Truck gatherings spearheaded by our What's Up Downtown Orinda leaders in concert with our Planning Director Drummond Buckley shows what we can do when we work together and how much we Orindans value the opportunity to be together," she said.

Miller believes that downtown housing is necessary and she is committed to doing the hard work to analyze impacts of more people living downtown on things like traffic, emergency evacuation, parking, parks, our library and schools. "State intervention into land use means the city has to be diligent in utilizing the tools that are available, such as utilization of objective design standards to retain and enhance the look of downtown."

Malkani said that she has seen little downtown development during her 16 years living in Orinda, but finally that is changing. "I know many Orinda residents join me in their excitement to see our downtown become a walkable, connected, vibrant community space," she said. We should move forward with the Downtown Precise Plan's vision of updating objective design criteria for mixed-use and residential land uses. I support moving forward sensibly but promptly with smart, sustainable growth that builds on Orinda's existing splendor to create vibrant, bustling community spaces and housing.

Gee's first goal is the completion of an excellent Downtown Precise Plan in 2021. Her second goal is for the City to build a much more active, ongoing dialogue with the downtown property owners and the Chamber. "We also want to facilitate industry communication that shares a renewed vision of Orinda without sacrificing the elements that so many residents appreciate."

Candidate Forums via Zoom, presented by the Orinda Association, will feature Orinda City Council candidates and MOFD candidates 6:30 to 8 p.m. Oct. 8.

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