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Split city council OK's Orinda parade on the Fourth of July

By Sora O'Doherty

In the face of Fourth of July celebrations being canceled by nearly every nearby municipality in the East Bay, the Orinda City Council voted to allow the annual parade to go on this year. Mayor Amy Worth and Council Member Inga Miller voted against the resolution, which allowed it to pass by a majority of one.

The event will be a scaled down version, allowing for the parade and some music in the Community Park, but no food will be purveyed and the event will be subject to the new guidelines expected to be issued by the CDC and Contra Costa County on June 15. While it is expected that there will not be a mask mandate, masks will be encouraged, and the Orinda Association hopes to sell bandanas with parade-associated designs. Masks will also be available at the event, for those who don't bring their own, and decorated masks will be distributed to all children.

There was discussion about what the usual attendance has been in the past, and what attendance might be expected this year. Concerns were expressed that if the Orinda parade is the only public event in the East Bay area, it might attract larger crowds of visitors from outside the city.

The resolution was passed at the city council meeting on June 1, which was the last date that would allow for the parade to go forward. The council did not have the luxury to wait longer in order to see exactly what the new requirements will be. Orinda Association President Bill Waterman and board of directors member Diane Lautz attended the city council meeting to discuss plans for the parade.

Former Orinda Association president Carlos Baltozano tried to speak on the matter, but was prevented by technical difficulties at the Zoom meeting. Latika Malkani, working as a captain with the OA on the parade, said that safety has been a priority measure, with plans to double volunteers to maintain social distancing. Malkani said that while she is concerned about the risk of community transmission, there have already been a large number of community events in Orinda, including graduation ceremonies and parties. "Orinda has been out, but we are not seeing a rise in infections," she said. She added that Orinda has an extremely high vaccination rate, with over 80% having received at least one shot, which will be higher by July 4.

Shannon Pedroni said, "It would be so wonderful to have a Fourth of July parade this year. We have been so careful; we'll come masked and keep apart. I would feel comfortable and confident," she said, while her 6-year-old daughter told the council, "I want a Fourth of July parade!"

A representative of Lamorinda Moms Demand Action said that group is excited and enthusiastic. Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan and the national president of Moms Demand Action have agreed to participate in the parade. They would be masked and riding in a convertible, while other members of the anti-firearm group would walk alongside the vehicle.

Miller led off the council discussion, characterizing the decision as incredibly difficult. She acknowledged that Orinda loves its parade, and praised the OA for raising the money, providing the volunteers, and creating the ambiance that "brings us all together."

"Nothing would make us feel more normal," she said, but added, "I don't believe either the OA or the city are prepared to run a parade," noting cities that have canceled events, including Piedmont, Danville, Alameda and Martinez. "If it were easy," she pointed out, "others would be doing it." She quoted Contra Costa County Public Health Officer Dr. Chris Farnitano, who said that a parade was safe for people who are vaccinated, but that he would discourage unvaccinated people from attending, and would encourage them to get vaccinated. "We hold the parade for the children," Miller concluded, "and they can't be vaccinated until September."

Vice Mayor Dennis Fay was in favor of approving the parade, noting that the local rate of vaccination is high, "well past herd immunity." He said that Dr. Anthony Fauci says that the chance of transmission outside is very low. Still, he agreed that masks should be encouraged and that any council member participating in the parade should wear a mask. Council Member Nick Kosla said that he was coming at the decision from another perspective. "I was thrilled to go to my kid's `advancement'" he said, adding, "As long as guidelines are followed, the OA is really commendable for even wanting to try."

Council Member Darlene Gee was particularly agonized, saying there wasn't a more difficult decision that she would want to be voting on. Even though there is an extremely high level of vaccination, Gee said it would have been her choice to wait another year. But she wouldn't oppose the parade going forward and will attend, wearing her mask.

Mayor Worth did oppose the parade for this year. "I appreciate the work of the OA over the years, their heroic work with seniors around town this year, their amazing inspiration during the COVID pandemic," she said. She said that she had spent a lot of time talking to staff in other cities, so many of which have deferred for one more year. She distinguished the event from graduations partly because of the limitations that were possible to enforce, and also because those events represented milestones in individuals' lives that only happen once. She also was concerned about the intensity of the parade for volunteers and for city staff, noting that the city currently has decreased staffing.

"There are lots of uncertainties," Worth said. "We don't know how many people will come. We may plan for two to three thousand, but get five to seven thousand."

The 3-2 vote was very unusual for a council that is almost always unanimous in its decisions.

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