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Long-term public works director Larry Theis leaves Orinda

By Sora O'Doherty

Larry Theis, who has been with Orinda for eight years as Director of Public Works and Assistant City Manager, is leaving for a position in the private sector. Orinda Mayor Amy Worth said it had been an honor to work with Theis over the years in many, many ways. His service was so outstanding, Worth said, that former city manager Steve Salomon promoted him to assistant city manager. The council presented a proclamation to Theis, and said that the city of Orinda had benefitted greatly from the projects that he had completed. In addition to presiding over the restoration of Orinda's roads, Theis was heavily involved in the rapid repair of the Miner Road sinkhole in 2017.

Vice Mayor Dennis Fay thanked Theis, whom he first worked with on the infrastructure committee. Fay said he appreciated Theis's responsiveness, including answering emails on the weekends. "We're really going to miss you," he added. Council Member Darlene Gee added, "I can't even really imagine that you're not going to be with us!" She said that the greatest gift was his help with Orinda's roads and infrastructure, attributing his "magnificent work" to bringing Orinda's infrastructure up to a much, much better condition than it was in when he started. Council Member Inga Miller said she felt very comfortable working with Theis, and Nick Kosla said that "between police chief David Cook, the school superintendent, and Larry, I don't know who gets more hate mail," but praised his ability to communicate in a calm, clear manner.

City Manager David Biggs, who started with the city in April, added that he recently was on vacation for a couple of weeks and had complete confidence in Theis. He attributed the improvement in Orinda's roads to Theis, whom he called a "font of institutional knowledge." Biggs told the council that city engineer Jason Chen will step in as acting director of public works.

Theis thanked the council, and said that his time in Orinda had been a great experience. "I've grown quite a bit," he said, "both as an engineer and a public servant." He was glad to be able to work with a very intelligent and even-keeled, decisive council as well as a lot of great city managers and staff. "My staff has been very instrumental in the success of the city," he said. "I've enjoyed working with the people of Orinda, seeing how the community has changed and shifted" over time. "Thank you for the recognition tonight," he said. "It wasn't really needed, but I do appreciate it."

When asked by The Lamorinda Weekly what he considered to be his greatest achievement at Orinda, Theis said, "looking back, I would say my proudest achievement in Orinda was building a great staff in my department." Eight years ago, Theis and another new engineer began work after the entire engineering department left. "We have been fortunate enough to hire some talented individuals," he said, which includes past and present staff.

In addition, Theis says the Miner Road Sinkhole Repair project was another achievement that he felt very proud of. "With the assistance of many individuals and a supportive city council, we were able to install a more modern and bigger culvert and reopen the road within six months." The Miner Road sinkhole happened in Theis's first nine months of being promoted to Public Works Director.

Theis considers the main challenge he stepped into eight years ago was repairing the city's poor roadway system. When he started, Orinda's roads were among the bottom five of all Bay Area agencies, but now ranks in the top five. Theis attributes this to the fact that "the voters of Orinda stepped up and taxed themselves to provide the financial means to accomplish the major improvement of the pavement condition of the public roadway system."

Looking forward for the city, Theis recognized that voters recently passed Measure R, another tax increase in November 2020, but the focus will shift to wildfire prevention and safety, which is the new challenge.

"The new director will have to address vegetation management along the public right of way corridors and balancing safety improvements without majorly impacting the semi-rural character of the community."

Expressing a sentiment common to Lamorinda residents, Theis concluded, "If it ever rains again, the city's existing drainage system still has a backlog of over \$25 million of necessary repairs."

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