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## Orinda takes return to in-person meetings slowly

By Sora O'Doherty

Mandated by the end of the COVID-19 State of Emergency to return to in-person meetings, the Orinda City Council decided on Feb. 21 to proceed slowly with a hybrid option. City Manager David Biggs, who presented the staff report to the council, noted that since he was hired during the pandemic, he has actually never attended an in-person council meeting. While the council heard and considered options for having a hybrid option to allow members of the public to continue to attend city council meetings via the Zoom meeting platform, the council decided to try simply returning to in-person meetings for the first two meetings in March.

In March, the council will return to its usual meeting place, the Orinda Library Auditorium, with all required staff and council members present in person. The Library Auditorium appeals to the council because it is a very large venue, allowing for the attendance of many people but still permitting a degree of social distancing. Insofar as the continued use of Zoom in that room, however, it is complicated, according to Biggs and City Clerk Sheri Smith, by the fact that the venue is used by many groups for a variety of events, which means that the technical equipment cannot be left in place but needs to be reinstalled each time it is needed.

As an alternative, the council considered holding meetings in the Sarge Littlehale room, a smaller venue at city hall where there would be less difficulty with the equipment. Currently the Moraga-Orinda Fire District has been holding hybrid Zoom meetings from the Sarge Room, as it is known. However, Mayor Inga Miller was concerned about the smaller size of the room making social distancing difficult and making it less attractive to groups who would like to attend the meetings, for example, Scout troops who might like to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

Vice Mayor Darlene Gee said that while she has no problem starting back in the Sarge Room, she didn't favor it for the long term. She suggested that participation via Zoom has not been very high during the pandemic and that during the transition data should be collected and evaluated to determine the benefit of hybrid meetings. Council Member Latika Malkani agreed, noting that "the one thing that COVID taught us is that we have to be flexible."

Additionally, the council agreed that it would be a good idea to keep an eye on what other jurisdictions are doing and how it is working out. Council Member Janet Riley summed it up: "I think we should take baby steps and evaluate it as we go slowly, trying different approaches."

City Attorney Osa Wolff spent some time explaining the possibility of council members attending meetings via Zoom under AB 2449. The new law provides that council members may attend via Zoom under certain circumstances, including in the event of the illness of the council member or a family member, or when the council member is traveling for the business of the council, but not for personal business travel. The procedures are rather complicated, and the council agreed that, while the possibility remains available, as a norm they prefer to simply miss a meeting in the event of illness or absence.

There was no public comment during the meeting, but Steve Cohn submitted a written comment that Zoom had been very helpful to people who might have disabilities involving mobility or hearing and he encouraged the council to continue with Zoom or a similar format.

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