

Published May 10th, 2023

Orindawoods celebrates 50 years

By Sora O'Doherty



Woodhall when first built Photo provided

sold off a number of acres for the construction of Highway 24 and the BART station, and decided to sell the remaining 187 acres.

The land was bought by Pacific Intermountain Express, a trucking company. The company intended to build its national headquarters on the property, and also build some housing. However, they received a great deal of pushback from the Orinda community and eventually abandoned their plans, selling the property in 1958 to four interested developers, who wanted to build a combination of single family and multiple family housing complexes with surrounding open area. They also failed to overcome the opposition from the Orinda community, failing on three occasions to obtain planning approval for development.

In 1968, the property was sold to RT Nahas & Company and Great Western Homes. According to Wong, Nahas had the brilliant idea of getting the county to first change the zoning for the property. This was before Orinda was incorporated as a city in 1985. Once the county agreed to rezone the land for single-family housing and multiple-family housing, planning permission was granted for the Orindawoods development.

Wong, who has done extensive research for the upcoming anniversary, believes that Nahas hired the best of the best architects, landscape architects and engineers to work on the development. He hired former owner Donald Doughty as the project manager, and sought out Maurice McClure, an engineer who was very well versed in infrastructure. McClure had been the engineer on the Hearst mansion at San Simeon when he had just graduated from the UC Berkeley School of Engineering, and he agreed to come out of retirement to work on the Orindawoods infrastructure.

McClure put together the Orindawoods masterplan, which included the roads, sewers, waterlines and other infrastructure. The development includes a number of public and private streets. There has been a long-term agreement with the city of Orinda for maintenance of some, but not all, of the private roads, which was reconsidered but left in place in June of last year.

Home construction began with The Knoll and Raven Hill, a group of townhomes which were first occupied in 1975. Orindawoods features clusters of different types of housing set in acres of open space. There are estate homes, single family homes built by owners on land purchased from the developer, patio homes which are detached but have little land, and townhomes which are attached in groups of two or three. In total, there are 257 homes on the 187 acres and every home has a view. Recently one accessory dwelling unit has been approved in Orindawoods. All of the homes are spacious, varying in the number of bedrooms and baths, but all over 2,000 square feet.

The development also includes Woodhall, the community center, a seven-court tennis club which is open to non-residents for a fee, and a swimming pool, in addition to the extensive landscaped shared open space. Because much of the housing is confined to clusters with little land per residence, there is more open space than in more traditional single-family home developments.

The first thing to be built at Orindawoods was the tennis courts, because there was little opposition to that amenity. The estate homes were built around 1975, and the patio homes between 1980 and 1989. Wong lives in the last of the patio homes to be completed.

Wong noted that even during the development of Orindawoods, opposition from the community continued, and there were several serious acts of vandalism, including releasing the brakes on a large tractor, that rolled down through Orinda, losing a wheel that traveled across Highway 24. A large cable spool was also

Orindawoods residents are celebrating the start of their development 50 years ago this month, with an exhibit of historic information and photographs at Woodhall, the Orindawoods community center. The exhibition will be open for Orindawoods residents only on May 20 and open to the public from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, May 21.

Cynthia Wong of the Orindawoods 50th Anniversary Committee, spoke to Lamorinda Weekly about the history of the development.

Like Wilder, the development at Orindawoods faced a great deal of opposition and it took decades from the time it was conceived until it was finally built, 1975-1989. The property, known as the Pine Grove property, was originally 300 acres. Owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District from 1917, it was held as part of the district's watershed. By 1955, however, EBMUD had

sent rolling down the hill and survey stakes were pulled up and moved.

In its 50-year history, the tennis club has had only three professionals. Keith Wheeler, a member of the United States Professional Tennis Association, has been in charge since 1995. In addition to managing the tennis club, Wheeler gives lessons Monday through Friday.

Other members of the anniversary committee are Rick Forney, Robert Michael DeStefano Carla Unroe, Kathleen Kerr Schochet, and Maggie Reeves. The celebration will be attended by Moraga-Orinda Fire Chief Dave Winnacker, son of the Woodhall architect, George Winnacker.

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