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Lafayette welcomes new mayor, Gina Dawson

By Lou Fancher



Incoming Mayor Gina Dawson receives a bouquet of flowers from outgoing Mayor Carl Anduri at the Dec. 11 Lafayette City Council meeting. Photo courtesy City of Lafayette

Addressed as "Mayor Dawson" at the start of a phone conversation two weeks after the Dec. 11 city council meeting during which the annual reorganization to approve a new mayor was enacted, her reply expresses excitement, confidence - and a tinge of amazement. "Oh yes, I guess I am the mayor now. Thank you."

□ The tone is not due to false modesty, but instead, rises from Dawson's respect for the privilege of leading the council and assuming a prominent role as she and her fellow council members serve the Lafayette community. Born on the Peninsula and raised primarily in Los Altos, Dawson's father is Filipino; her mother Irish and Welsh. She has five brothers and describes the family home as "idyllic," and her parents as "lovely, generous, and great listeners who gave us independence to be who we wanted to be."

□ Service and caring for others, education, and respect for culture and history were central themes in the family's lives. Her father came from the Philippines to Philadelphia to complete a surgical residency and at the hospital met her mother, a nurse who lived "just a block from the Liberty Bell," Dawson said. "They guided us to be educated, without being directive."

□ After Dawson graduated from California State University, Chico, with a double major in organizational communications and psychology, she worked in management positions at tech companies before moving with her husband and two children to Lafayette. Becoming an active volunteer in the community, Dawson and her husband formed the nonprofit group Save Lafayette Trees. The organization has worked closely with Lafayette Gas Safety Alliance in matters related to utility safety that often involves interactions with PG&E and the California Public Utilities Commission.

□ "I recently went back to look at the priorities I ran on when campaigning to join the council and saw I still have the same priorities: utility safety, housing, and a vibrant downtown. At least I'm consistent. It was fun to see that core is the same as when I moved here to raise my kids. I want to make this city a place everyone can call home."

□ During the Dec. 11 council meeting, Dawson outlined what have been the council's 2023 priorities and her goals for 2024, interweaving safe connections and community coalition building, along with a commitment to service and working hard to find inclusive, innovative solutions. "Our priority is to do what the community wants and to make sure the staff has the resources to do those things. We try to figure that out with the lean budget we have. Each of us brings experience and values. This group of council members are good at listening to each other and negotiating with that practice."

□ The council priorities until the new fiscal year starts in July are wildfire prevention, safe mobility in the city's downtown and near schools, supporting a vibrant downtown, and fiscal responsibility short- and long-term. The council will set new priorities in early 2024 for the July transition.

□ Moving forward, Dawson highlighted plans to leverage the investment already made in areas such as plans for affordable housing. "We just spent the past three years working on [The 6th Cycle Housing Element] and getting information out publicly. There's been work to listen to the community and then to hone that down. That's an investment and we need to use it as our map to build the 2,114 houses required by the state in the next eight-year cycle. We have to use it and work with the people we've identified who are interested in making it happen." Dawson said key stakeholders will be property holders, developers, financiers, nonprofit homebuilders, for-profit organizations and companies like utility companies.

□ The challenges - to incentivize developers without compromising the city's fiscal security or residents' safety - have multiple moving parts. Managing more people circulating in the downtown core requires looking not only at vehicle traffic, but paying close attention to pedestrian and bicycle safety. Dawson says making Lafayette both safe and an enjoyable place to live, work and visit must come with tremendous collaboration and considerable community input.

□ "There's a survey out now and we're going to send out more questions to ask what people envision, what their roles might be. Do they want to see more parks? What are their central concerns? We can show our reserves and revenue stream and create options for them to respond to. Our Physical Sustainability Committee, I imagine, will have town halls and meetings. I'm not privy to their plans until they put it out, but I do know the first steps are underway."

□ Asked to summarize the overall approach she will bring to her term as mayor, Dawson says, "For me, personally, the phrase 'united against hate' means leading with love and kindness. It's how I see the world and it starts with an individual, but as we stand together, we can have that as a value; to stand against hateful language, violence. There's no gray area there. The public will come with their comments and opinions they are entitled to, but for the council, we can say we stand united against hate. When I said that at the meeting, I prefaced it with what is out there in the world now and how that means that here, at home

in Lafayette, each word - 'united,' 'against,' and 'hate' - has meaning. The words combined in one phrase, that's where we are, unequivocally."

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