

Meet Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu

By David Anderson



Emmanuel Ursu, Orinda Planning Director Photo David Anderson

It is widely regarded that if you want to know what's going on in Orinda you ask Emmanuel Ursu, Planning Director for the City of Orinda. When it comes to planning or skiing or fine dining, Emmanuel knows what he is talking about and he is the man to ask.

Growing up in Vancouver, British Columbia, Emmanuel developed an interest in building at an early age while visiting his father, who was a contractor, at his construction sites. As a child he says he was "always interested in how things were built and how things were put together." These visits planted the seed that led to his desire to first pursue Architecture and later a career in planning.

Ursu attended Cal Poly Pomona where he turned his interest to Urban and Regional Planning. Upon graduation, he took a job in 1989 as a Planning Technician with Willdan, a planning and development firm in Southern California. It was there that he learned the ropes and began his career in planning. While at Willdan, he worked on projects in Santa Monica, Calabasas, Malibu and Rancho Palos Verdes. Ursu worked his way up to Senior Planner at Willdan before moving to the Bay Area in 2000 to become Planning Director for Orinda.

Although he misses life in Southern California, Ursu now resides in Orinda and enjoys one of the Bay Area's easiest commutes as he lives only two miles from the new city office building. When not at work making Orinda a better place to live for its residents, Ursu enjoys downhill skiing, running and fine dining. Squaw Valley, Alpine and Kirkwood are his favorite places to Ski in the Tahoe area. His favorite restaurants are Gary Denko on special occasions,

Bix for its martinis, Boulevard, Limon for Peruvian food and Absinthe which he enjoys when making visits to the City Attorney's office in San Francisco.

Now in his eighth year as Planning Director for Orinda, Ursu still has a vision for Orinda's future but recognizes the Wilder development (formerly Orinda Gateway) near the Caldecott Tunnel as one of his proudest accomplishments. He says "It is the single most significant project we have had in Orinda probably since development first started here." The project, which started the planning process in the early nineties, received immediate opposition locally and from environmental groups. When Ursu first started in Orinda, the city had just resubmitted development permit applications to the various resource agencies. Along with the City Council and the developer, Ursu was able to help get the project on track again. According to Ursu, "It was a team effort on both the city side and the developer's side." Those efforts led to the Wilder development groundbreaking last summer.

What Ursu likes most about Orinda is that the City Council and the Planning Commission "really take interest in issues residents care about," adding, "it's not just lip service." He believes that the Council listens to all sides of an issue and works to make decisions that are in the best interest of Orinda's citizens.

Ursu envisions that within ten years Orinda will have Pine Grove and Wilder developed and they will begin to feel part of the community. Four to five properties in downtown including the former Phairs location will be redeveloped, San Pablo Creek will be restored and the Orinda Theater will be community-owned and operated featuring film as well as live theater. Some homes in Orinda that are older than fifty years will likely get a reconstruction and "hopefully we'll have a solution to our infrastructure problem with our roads."