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Published January 6th, 2010

Chambers of Commerce Flex Their Muscles for 2010

By Sophie Braccini



Lafayette Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jay Lifson (right) and new Board President Cesar Perales Photo courtesy Lafayette Chamber

If commerce is the heartbeat of the community, then their respective Chamber of Commerce serves as a key indicator of that health. Each of the three chambers, Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda, while very different in size, share the same philosophy. In 2010 they will pursue 3 objectives: service to their members, advocacy toward the community and the lobbying of local government. Depending on their respective situations, each Chamber emphasizes different aspects of that strategy. New board members, and in some cases new board presidents, will bring new ideas while maintaining their course.

2010 is seen by the 3 chambers as being pivotal in an economic recovery. As such, none of them want to burden their members with increased membership dues. "Our budget is conservative," says Jay Lifson, the Executive Director of the Lafayette Chamber, "we won't increase our membership for the second year in a row." But that does not mean that service to members will not improve. "We want to solidify and maintain a high level of service," says Cesar Perales, the new President of the Lafayette Chamber Board, "we will focus on our core base of service and make sure to provide value added to our membership." The Lafayette Chamber does not serve as a consultant or an advertising agency for its members, but rather as a source of support, information and training.

As part as their effort to support the business communities, the 3 chambers have revamped their web sites. In Lafayette and Moraga new sites have been added that are geared towards searching businesses and services. The <http://shopmoragafirst.com> website includes a search engine that allows shoppers to look up specific products and services. Lafayette offers a similar service at

<http://www.trylafayettefirst.com>; this site also supports the Chamber's new "Put Your Money Where Your House Is" campaign.

At <http://www.orindachamber.org>, merchants can now advertise their businesses on the front page. "This gives a great visibility for a rather small investment," says Sue Breedlove, the Orinda Chamber's new President, "our web site gets 20,000 hits a month; it can function as 'yellow pages' for residents."

Chamber involvement in the community translates into events that it either initiates or supports. "'Live at the Orinda' is an original idea of Rick Kattenburg," says Breedlove, "for the first time, in March of 2010, the Orinda Chamber is inviting the community to a stand-up comedy show in the Orinda Theater. It will be fun!" In Moraga, the Chamber's involvement will aim at shaping the future of the town. "We will move forward on re-branding the Town of Moraga as home to St. Mary's College and continue to expand that relationship," says Edy Schwartz, the Moraga Chamber's President. That Chamber also plans to engage the property owner of the Rheem Shopping Center, where the occupancy rate has dropped dramatically. "We do not want to see more empty spots," says Frank Melon, Executive Director of the Moraga Country Club and a new Chamber Board member.

In addition to the pleasure and convenience provided by an interesting retail base, the business community is an important source of revenue for each jurisdiction. In Lamorinda the revenues generated by sales tax vary by community. The sales tax per capita revenue is \$49 in Moraga, \$56 in Orinda and \$116 in Lafayette. Moraga derives 14% of its income through that tax, Lafayette 22% (2008/2009 budget), and Orinda 9% (2008-2009 budget). The size of the business community and resulting Chambers are commensurate with those figures. Lafayette's Chamber has 638 members and is one of the largest in the Bay Area; Orinda has 200 members, and Moraga 130.

The Chambers represent their constituencies when it comes to discussions with local government. "The city comes to us for input and we provide it," says Breedlove, "for example, we spoke against a business license tax. We think that the limited revenue would not compensate the administrative cost of the new tax."

In Lafayette, the Chamber has been active in the development of the Downtown Specific Plan. "We have been on record supporting the Advisory Committee's original plan," says Lifson, "we cannot support the revised plan. Limiting the building height to a base of 25 feet infringes on the rights of property owners and is not favorable to develop profitable retail."

Moraga Chamber Vice President Larry Tesler was part of the Revenue Enhancement Committee that recommended the establishment of a business license tax, providing that smaller businesses are minimally impacted.

"This will be a year where the dominant feelings are uncertainty and a certain skittishness about the future," says Daniel A. Barnes,

CFA, of Barnes Capital in Lafayette. You may be familiar with this legendary curse -- May you live in interesting times. "Right now, for better or worse, our world is pretty interesting," he adds.

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Sue Breedlove, Orinda's new Chamber of Commerce Board President Photo courtesy Orinda Chamber

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