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Orinda Chamber's New Board: Pushing Forward with Professionalism

By Sophie Braccini



Orinda Chamber board members at their June 18 meeting, from left: Dina Zapanta, Paul Koenig, Tonya Gilmore (city liaison), Roy Hodgkinson, Sylvia Jorgensen (president), Patti Camras (secretary), Chris Flum, Candy Kattenburg (executive director), Susan Martin (vice president), and David Cronin. Not pictured: Carlos Rangel, Richard Westin, Nora Harlow, and Jim Breedlove (ambassador chair). Photo provided

The Orinda chamber also plans to reach out to other chambers and participate in their events to broaden the exposure of its own members. The board entered a Team Trivia Night last April with the Emeryville, Berkeley and Albany chambers of commerce. "We had a great time and made a great showing there with two tables," says Jorgensen, "and I've been talking with Sue Breedlove from Rotary to do something similar in our community because it is great fun."

As part of its outreach efforts, each month the chamber will donate a Shop Orinda Bag, filled with items donated by chamber members to raffles outside of Orinda to entice people to shop in the city.

The chamber is also continuing to reach out to in-home business owners. "The first reception on February 5 was a great success," says Jorgensen. "Some of these businesses became members and we involved them in our Ambassadors program." Jim Breedlove chairs that program, which he says is a great opportunity for people to participate in an event and make new contacts.

"Our events and mixers are great 'shmoozetunities,'" says Jorgensen, "an opportunity to schmooze and the ambassador role helps build instant camaraderie while having fun."

The effort to professionalize the chamber will manifest in different ways. "We are joining the Western Association of Chamber Executives (WACE) that offers great training and opportunities for chambers of commerce," says Jorgensen. Kattenburg will be the first to be sent this year to the WACE academy that Jorgensen went to herself when she was working for the San Leandro chamber.

Other actions have been set in motion to formalize certain processes such as establishing criteria for the designation of the Business of the Year. In addition, "Paul Koenig and Roy Hodgkinson are working at crafting and drilling down our message to communicate across different platforms with our constituency," Jorgensen says.

Hodgkinson is also working on a premiere package chamber sponsorship with Nora Harlow for those large businesses that want to support the chamber at a higher level.

The board continues to work on signature events such as the Orinda Restaurant Tour, scheduled for Sept. 24 this year. "We have asked all the restaurants, especially the smaller ones, to give us feedback on what we are doing right and can improve for this year," says Jorgensen.

"The board we have now, with its mix of new and seasoned professionals, is full of energy and ideas," says Jorgensen, whose term lasts three years. "This is a great time to be a part of it."

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With a mix of returning and new members, the new board of the Orinda Chamber of Commerce is getting fired-up under the leadership of its new president, Sylvia Jorgensen. A senior financial advisor with Merrill Lynch Wealth Management, the Orinda resident brings to the board years of professional management of a chamber of commerce. Before joining the financial world, she worked as the membership director of the large San Leandro Chamber of Commerce. With executive director Candy Kattenburg serving as the anchor of the group, the board is structuring its new and existing programs to enhance its mission of serving its members, the Orinda business community, and the chamber community (some members are not Orinda businesses).

"Our objective is to grow our membership by 25 new businesses this year," says Jorgensen. "We have about 220 members now." The new president and her board are trying different ways to reach that goal. One of their first actions was to produce a new chamber directory more frequently, now every 16 months. "This new version is very emblematic of the Orinda community, in terms of editorial content and esthetics," says Jorgensen.

The board is looking into developing new events such as a 'Senior Moment' event similar to an event facilitated by the San Leandro chamber. "This event featured a chamber member who serves seniors," says Jorgensen. "David Cronin is looking into it." The board does not want to repeat what the Moraga or Lafayette chambers are doing in Lamorinda, but may partner with them.

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