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Longtime Orinda City Manager Janet Keeter Says Goodbye

By Sora O'Doherty



Janet Keeter inspects the Orinda sinkhole. Photo Tod Fierner

Janet Keeter concludes 33 years of local government service when she retires as Orinda City Manager in February.

Keeter, announced her retirement on

Oct. 31 in order to make it clear that the election results had no influence on her decision. Originally intending to leave Feb. 3, Keeter has extended her time to allow new Interim City Manager Steve Salomon to come on board. (See story page A6)

Orinda was incorporated as a city in 1985; 20 years later Keeter arrived in 2005 as Orinda's third city manager. Keeter has now been with the city for 11-and-a-half years.

When Keeter arrived, the city government was operating out of trailers and a leased parking lot. One of her first and biggest projects was managing the building of the city hall, which involved a three-way land exchange with the city, the Orinda Union School District and Pulte Homes. Pulte built the infill housing project Orinda Grove consisting of 73 homes on the old library site; the new library and the city hall were constructed on their current sites. The city hall construction took two years.

Another major project during Keeter's time has been the Wilder development of 245 homes, which was approximately 20 years in the planning stages. Keeter's involvement has been with the public amenities, such as the three playing fields and the art and garden center, plus the Ranch House, which was given to the city and is used for events such as weddings.

Since Orinda follows the practice of electing a new mayor each year, with the vice mayor stepping up to mayor, Keeter has had experience with working with many mayors over her years with Orinda. All the mayors are volunteers (as is the city council), and each has individual preferences about how to interact with the staff, be it by in person visits, email or telephone calls. The city manager handles the day-to-day operation of the city, including agenda preparation for the twice-monthly city council meetings, in addition to hiring all the city's department directors, except for the city attorney, who is hired by the city council.

Although Orinda is a small city and has a very lean operation — which means that Keeter has had no assistant or deputy city manager — she had enjoyed being “a big fish in a little pond.”

Keeter says that she has appreciated the full support of the city council members. When she first came to Orinda, she was very impressed with the large number of volunteers in the city. She lauds the qualifications of them, who encompass retired attorneys, CEOs, CFOs and other professionals. If Orinda had to pay for such quality and experience it could never afford it, Keeter believes. She also appreciated the garden club's beautification projects, in-

cluding the annual scarecrows, wreaths and landscaping of city property.

The job, for which the city is currently recruiting, is never boring, Keeter says. Handling elections, interacting with the city council and commissions, and managing city employees makes the job very exciting. Who handles the city manager's duties when the manager is absent, like, for example, on vacation? Keeter noted that she had an excellent relationship with former longterm city clerk Michelle Olsen, and has even had the police chief step in from time to time.

So, after all this fun and excitement, what is Keeter looking forward to? Dinners at home and no more night meetings! Keeter enjoys cooking, hiking, golf and spending time with her family. She has been married 29 years and has no children. She wonders aloud what it might be like, skiing during the middle of the week, and looks forward to finding out.

What were the biggest changes Keeter observed during her time in Orinda? Growing support for getting the roads fixed. The city is now well situated for a change of management. The roads project is well underway, staffing levels are good — Keeter is delighted with new city clerk Sheri Spediacci — and a new city manager can start fresh with downtown development.

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