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Published October 12th, 2022

Six candidates vie to fill three seats on the Orinda City Council

By Sora O'Doherty

Outgoing city manager Janet Keeter, who left in 2017, marveled about the incredible quality of volunteers in Orinda, and the 2022 general election is proving her right again. At a candidates' forum on Oct. 6, all the candidates agreed that whoever wins the election will be great for Orinda. During the nearly two-hour forum, the candidates answered questions from the public on a wide range of issues affecting Orinda. They also responded to a set of questions posed to them separately by The Lamorinda Weekly. The candidates forum was sponsored by the Orinda Association and the Orinda News and moderated by the League of Women Voters, Diablo Valley chapter.

All of the candidates had positive views of the Downtown Precise Plan, although candidate Brandyn Iverson believes that the city should modify the DPP to create overlay districts alternative to "the state's one-note 'density for affordability' incentive." A common thread in their answers was the need to provide affordable housing for Orinda's schoolteachers, firefighters, and city personnel. Stuart House emphasized that he has been encouraged to run for city council instead of the Orinda Union School District board to promote interface between the city and the school board. He is particularly interested in housing for teachers and seniors.

Alex Drexel, the former chair and current commissioner of the Orinda Parks and Recreation, who was appointed by the mayor of Oakland to the Oakland Civil Service Board where he worked to balance interest of city workers, community and taxpayers to find just outcomes, suggested that Orinda needs campaign finance reform, so that candidates wouldn't need to raise about \$20,000 to run for a volunteer position. On the subject of BART parking, the candidates were also unanimous in expressing the need for solutions. Latika Malkani suggested sheltered bike paths and increased bike storage at BART. Janet Riley agreed and suggested that bike storage should provide for electric bicycles as well. She also suggested expanding the park and ride facilities to additional church parking lots. Stuart House is a proponent of the Smart Parking Initiative, which uses an internet-based interface to enable people to reserve parking spaces up to two weeks in advance. Alex Drexel added that in addition to shuttle services, Orinda should leverage ride share applications, and Sunil Rajaraman added that the city needs to find ways to lessen traffic on Moraga Way through community rideshare options.

The six candidates offer a wealth of experience in different fields. Attorney Malkani noted that she hopes to accomplish what in large part motivated her initial 2020 council bid: to govern from her lived experience "which has given me a liking for results that are good and just, for acknowledging bias and looking for bias interrupters, for caring for today's children and tomorrow's environment." Malkani serves on the Supplemental Sales Tax Oversight Commission that is guiding the use of the funds raised by the new tax to improve Orinda's wildfire safety and for other uses.

House recently retired from the OUSD, where he served for many years as Director of Facilities. House noted that, "as an African American and former civil rights worker, I have dedicated my life to fighting for the rights of all people." House has worked for local, state and national governments, is a licensed contractor and has built 1,300 homes for Native Americans. A native of Michigan, he once ran the Michigan Senate and worked on the Jimmy Carter's campaign for the presidency.

Iverson, chair of the Orinda Planning Commission on which she has served for seven years, emphasized her 20 years of experience in commercial real estate. She graduated from Stanford with a degree in economics and architecture and also has an MBA and a law degree. Her parents were real estate developers who built Calistoga Ranch.

Janet Riley is also an attorney, who worked as a business and tax attorney for small businesses and non-profits, before she had children. Since then, Riley has 30 years of experience volunteering in Orinda, from chairing the Fourth of July Parade to being president of the Educational Foundation of Orinda, now ONE Orinda. She runs the social justice committee at Santa Maria Church, which has brought three refugee families to Orinda.

Rajaraman has started multiple technology companies, but credits his experience as being a dad of two young daughters at Wagner Ranch Elementary School as keeping him energetic and on alert at all times, while also giving him a firsthand look into the community, where he plans to remain for a long time. Responding to public questions at the candidates' forum, all of the candidates acknowledged that private roads are of concern in Orinda, but all thought that they would need further study before they could express an opinion or offer a solution. In response to a question of gun violence, most expressed the opinion that Orinda does not have a real problem with gun violence at this time. House pointed out that most gun violence results in suicide and domestic violence, which, he added, is really hard to regulate. However Malkani suggested that gun violence should be a big priority for Orinda, as gun violence is on the rise everywhere. Education is key, she said. House also noted, in a rebuttal answer, that he had been responsible for school safety at the OUSD and had done a number of things. However, he said he is afraid of arming all teachers: "That's not a direction in which we should go."

All the candidates supported making Juneteenth an official holiday for Orinda, but wouldn't commit to banning gas leaf blowers, noting the potential effects on gardeners. Election day is Nov. 8. All citizens were mailed ballots on Oct. 10, which can be returned by mail, to secure ballot boxes, or to polling places. In-person early voting will take place on Nov. 4, Nov. 5 and Nov. 7. The closest early voting polling place to Lamorinda is Walnut Creek City Hall.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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