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Gardennest brings floral beauty to Country Club Plaza

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Sora O'Doherty

Gardennest breathes life into Orinda Village with fresh plants and accessories.

Assistant Planner Darin Hughes introduced the Orinda City Council on Dec. 5 to a number of new businesses recently opened in the city. Among those new businesses was Gardennest, a garden design firm that decided to open a retail shop. Owner Jean-

nie Fitch and Kelli Schley appeared at the meeting and, although they said they were both a little shy, spoke about their endeavor.

Introducing them, Hughes noted that the retail location had its grand opening on Oct. 7. Located at 105 Orinda

Way, Hughes praised the shop for how much effort they've been putting into that space. "The shop itself is beautiful," he said. "The street out front is beautiful." In addition, he said, "they've been working with their neighbors, in order to sync up hours, so that everybody's open at the same time and kind of seems like they've got the really cool community ecosystem going on."

The shop has a small patio in back, and has been holding events there. They also participated in the Orinda Village holiday market. Hughes welcomed them as really excellent partners with everyone that's down at that end of town.

Fitch said that she has lived in Orinda for close to 30 years and raised her daughter and

built her business in Orinda. She is a landscape contractor as well as running the shop. She said that it has been a longtime dream of hers to have her own flower shop. "And it's kind of, you know, morphed into something bigger and more fun. My daughter Reagan is one of the buyers along with Kelli."

Fitch said that the space is much bigger than she ever imagined. "You know, it's kind of turned into a whole other animal, on its own." A lot of creative energy has gone into putting the shop together. "It's a really old building. I don't know if you know that it's the old Penny Lane hair salon. So it actually had two different entrances. When we took over the salon, we then opened the wall that kind of divided the two spaces."

Fitch praised Kelli as a plant guru: "She's really great and she's my plant buyer and her background is horticulture and she's worked at several big nurseries." She also had kind words for the shop's neighboring stores, Maureen at Rechic, Susan Leech who owns the little antique shop, and Gepetto's Cafe, saying, "They are really adorable and super supportive of us."

Fitch welcomed everyone to come and make new friends down on that side of the town. "The buildings are really charming; I mean, they're old history," she said. "I don't know if you guys know that that building was built in the 1940s and it used to be a residence." One of the things that was uncovered during the renovation was an upstairs fireplace. "It's gorgeous,"

Fitch enthused, "and we uncovered built-in bookshelves on either side that had been covered with drywall." All of this has now been opened up and it's like our showroom.

Mayor Inga Miller agreed: "It's really beautiful, it's really incredible. It's something that you expect to see maybe on Fourth Street in Berkeley or somewhere in San Francisco or Santa Barbara. It's really something just eye-opening that I really haven't seen on this side of the tunnel or elsewhere in this region."

Miller compared Gardennest to another new business in Orinda, Fish Barn. She credited both business with drawing people in to Orinda and showing that what Orinda has to offer is really important.

No libraries open on Sundays

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Solano County, for example, has had a 1/8 cent sales tax dedicated to the library for almost 30 years. In November 2022, San Francisco voters approved renewal of their Library Preservation Fund (LPF) for the next 25 years. The LPF is SFPL's largest budget source, measuring 99% percent of its FY23 budget of \$185.7 million, and making the San Francisco Library one of the

best funded in the country. Santa Clara voters also endorsed special funding for their libraries in 1994, 2005 and 2013.

Converse agreed with Brown's suggestion that the county was basing their refusal to allow Orinda Library to open on Sundays on an equity issue. Although Brown points out that the Orinda Library is open to everyone, Converse stated that not all of the libraries have outside

funding that allows for additional opening hours. Additionally, although there might be staff willing to volunteer at the Orinda Library, they might not be willing to volunteer at the other branches, including more distant ones such as Pittsburg, Antioch, or Oakley. Brown notes that the Orinda Library is close to the Orinda BART station, at only 0.6 miles away.

President of the Friends of Orinda Li-

brary, Nancy Ross-Madnick, commenting on Sunday library opening, said, "While it is a laudable goal, complete equity is difficult to achieve. By opening up some branches on Sundays, the libraries would be available to everyone in the county. Under the current plan, none of the 26 branches have Sunday hours. Isn't it better for the community to have some access to library services rather than none?" She added, "Ideally, the county should make fully-funding all Contra Costa County libraries a high priority. But if the county chooses not to,

then let the cities that want to fund Sunday hours have their branches open to serve the greater community."

Converse said that while the cities in which the libraries are located are required to provide for the maintenance of the buildings and some technical services, the county pays for the operational costs, including staffing, books, etc. There are also five libraries that are in unincorporated county areas. There has not been a library bond, as such bonds are very difficult to pass, Converse said, requiring a two-thirds majority vote, and many

other county departments would also love to receive bond funding.

However, according to Converse, there is a plan for a pilot program for Sunday library opening, starting with the Concord library, sometime in 2024. Under that plan, the Concord library, which is 0.8 miles from the Concord BART station, will be open on Sundays with no library staff present, except for one security guard. Library patrons will be required to get approval in advance for Sunday library use, and the details of how this will work have not yet been finalized.

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