

A Time for Change

Tiburon's new vice mayor talks about how challenges around diversity, technology, open space and pandemic closures are reshaping the town for the better.

By Daniel Jewett

Jon Welner is a busy guy. Not only is he the recently elected vice mayor of Tiburon, where he and his family have lived for 17 years, but he serves on numerous committees there, is president and on the board of the Osher Marin Jewish Community Center, is a leading environmental lawyer at the law firm Mintz, and is on the advisory board of the Environmental Law Section of the California Lawyers Association, among other pursuits. Welner talks about what 2021 holds for the town of Tiburon.

In September of last year Tiburon police had a volatile encounter with Yema Khalif and Hawi Awash, the Black owners of Yema clothing store on Main Street, that led to the resignation of one police officer and the early retirement of the chief of police. In the aftermath a new diversity and inclusion committee was created. What can you tell me about that?

What happened at Yema was terrible. I saw the video and I thought it was inappropriate behavior and it needed to be fixed. But I think we are responding to it wonderfully and I am very excited about this new diversity and inclusion committee. I insisted and am really happy that all the council members are participating in it along with the public. It's going to be a great learning exercise. We are going to take what we learn and everyone's ideas and make Tiburon a better place.

Tell us about the Use of Technology Committee that you lead?

It was the first thing I launched when I joined the council. Tiburon is one of the minority of communities that has posted audio instead of video of its council meetings. It seems like a small thing, but I think it really does matter to people in terms of feeling like government is transparent and feeling like they are participating. One of the effects of the pandemic has



been that all of our meetings are now on Zoom. I anticipate that after things return to normal, it will be a relatively easy matter to get the council to agree to video webcasting all of our meetings.

What is currently being done at the 110-acre open space Martha property in the hills above Tiburon where a development of 42 large homes is being proposed?

I've been working on a pro bono basis with the Tiburon Open Space Committee for well over a decade now trying to ensure that any development that occurs there is thoughtful and appropriate. We've been working and hoping to find a solution whereby some combination of the county and/or Tiburon could acquire the property and preserve it as open space. There are negotiations going on now between the Open Space Committee and the owner over creating an appraisal and trying to figure out if there is some way to broker a deal. I'm hopeful and optimistic that we'll

find a way to keep that as open space for the benefit of everyone.

How are Tiburon's restaurants and retail doing during pandemic times and what is being done to help them?

It's been really tough and we've lost some businesses, which is a source of great concern. We did have a very successful program that was really well liked to close off Main Street to cars in the summer months through October 1. It was a hopeful development that occurred. We are doing everything we can to help folks hang on until the vaccine becomes widely available and hopefully things come back to normal in the spring. The Caprice restaurant is under new ownership and has been using this time to rebuild and remodel; the new Michael Mina restaurant has been under construction all this time — so there are signs of great hope, new places that will open when things return to normal. 