

Moraga Center Specific Plan: Will The Dream Ever Come True?

By Sophie Braccini

A beautiful winter morning can bring high hopes especially when town officials, property owners, architects and members of the community come together to create a vision for downtown Moraga. Saturday, January 12, was just such a morning at the Hacienda de Las Flores. The sweet scent of humus and eucalyptus perfumed the air, while in La Salla, two design firms worked to get a better understanding of what the community wants to see happen in downtown Moraga.

Joining the Town Council, Town Manager and environmental consultant were a handful of Moraga residents, including two members of the Bruzzone family which owns the property addressed by the Specific Plan. SZFM and the Dahlin Group, the Bay Area firms competing to be the Town's urban design consultant, each led discussion groups.

In the first group led by Dahlin, participants explained what they were seeing today and what they would like improved. The intersection of Moraga Road and Moraga Way is generally considered to be the center of Moraga. Yet, as most of the participants sadly noted, when one reaches this junction, nothing is reminiscent of an attractive and vibrant village center. As Vice-Mayor Dave Totter noted, "Moraga lacks a focal point of interaction."

The Dahlin Group brought pictures of different centers to get a feel for the styles people might favor. Their approach

inspired visions of what the village could become. Ideas included extending St Mary's Road on the other side of Moraga Way to reach the Ranch area, rehabilitation of the creek that runs behind that section, mixed housing where the outflow parking lot is and multi-family homes in the pear orchard that lies between the creek and Camino Ricardo. After the first session, groups switched places and a similar interaction happened with the other firm.

SZFM moved its workshop along a bit differently, explaining how they had turned other helpless commercial places into vibrant spots. Their vision would create a gradual approach to the village center, starting by re-populating both sides of Moraga Way, re-framing the existing center into a more quaint space and organizing a gathering center closer to the creek.

When her turn came to express her thoughts, Joan Bruzzone talked about the history of Moraga and the vision that her husband, the late Russell Bruzzone, had for the town. "Since the original concept was for Moraga to accommodate 60,000 people, my husband planned the roads surrounding the shopping center to handle that anticipated population. At that same time, the original plan was to have access to two freeways going through Moraga, which would account for that scope of thought."

She later reflected on the process itself. "The idea of soliciting architectural designs was not approved by us, only by the Town," she said, "which I consider a very

unique situation. I find it most unusual for the Town to preempt the prerogative of the property owner to make the initial architectural presentation and to solicit the town's participation before that of the property owner. It has always been my naivete that the property owner still maintained at least a modicum of legal as well as private property privileges, other than to pay real estate and parcel taxes. I would certainly hate to have been mistaken all these years."

On January 23rd, the Council will hear public comments and decide which firm should be awarded a contract to create a visual of what the downtown area could become. Mayor Deschambault has been advocating this approach for months: "In all things, there is a need to move forward and at the same time seek compromise and buy-in from all the stakeholders involved," she says, "if we do not do them all simultaneously than that is when nothing happens. This charette was a new approach and I am optimistic about continuing the discussions. I am excited that we can begin to see visual presentations of what this might look like. I hope the landowners will continue to express their interests, their concerns, and their dreams."

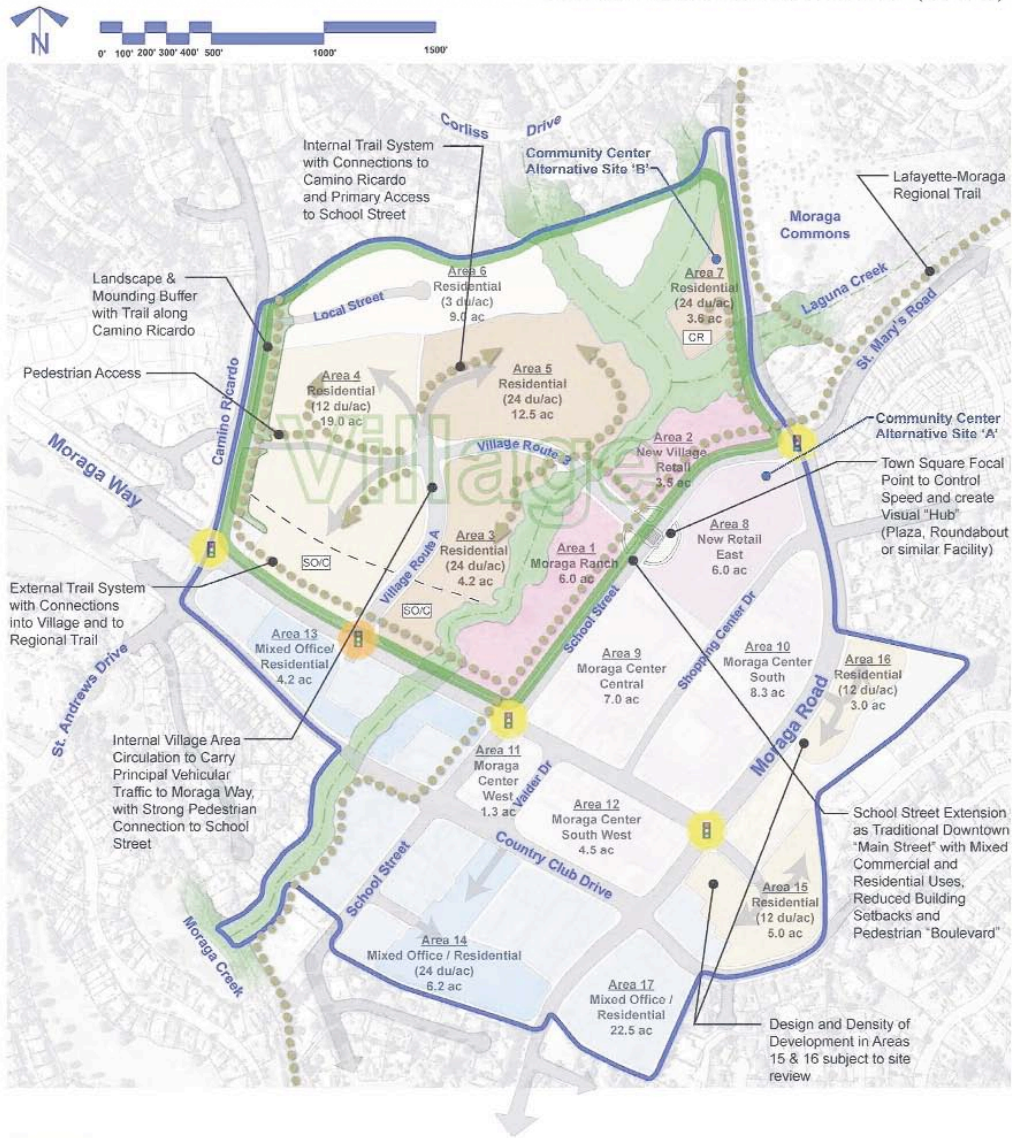
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MORAGA CENTER SPECIFIC PLAN

Illustrative Land Use and Circulation Plan (05.30.07)



- Community Commercial
- Mixed Commercial / Residential (12-24 du/ac)
- Residential (12-24 du/ac)
- Residential (6-12 du/ac)
- Residential (3-6 du/ac)
- Public Facilities
- Open Space
- Suburban Office / Residential

- Trail System
- Village Policy Area
- Modified Signal
- Approximate Signal & Intersection Location
- Creek & Setback
- Residential Base Density with Suburban Office/Commercial Overlay (SOC)
- Residential Base Density with Commercial Recreation Overlay (CR)

Note: Acreages shown for 17 sub-areas reflect usable land area. See Land Use Summary Table for additional details. Specific Plan Land Use Element to provide policy on mixed-use development. Aggregate development totals to be consistent with Table 1. All roadways and improvements approximate in location.

This map is part of the Draft-EIR and can be found online at The Town of Moraga's web site:
http://www.moraga.ca.us/moraga_planning_department.php