

November Politics Overshadows Council Meeting

By Sophie Braccini

It was an atypical meeting on April 30th when the Moraga Town Council met with the Planning Commission to discuss modifying the Town's Hillside Development Ordinance. The meeting adjourned after an hour and a half, and did not produce a decision or indeed substantive discussion of the issue at hand. Two potential open space measures, that may both reach the ballot in November 2008, cast too large a shadow to allow debate.

Discussion of the Hillside Ordinance began twenty months ago. The text of the ordinance has been a source of confusion for the average Moraga homeowner. The last time the Planning Commission met about this project was October of last year, and the text has not changed.

After the report was presented by Planning Director Lori Salamack, Council Member Rochelle Bird asked if any Council Member had seen the report before it was made public. Mayor Deschambault acknowledged that she had read it as part of her weekly meeting with the Town Manager, and that she had asked for some modifications in the format, but not the content, of the report. Town Manager Phil Vince explained that mayors routinely review documents with him. The dispute led to a decision that procedures and norms would be reviewed during a future Council meeting.

The meeting veered further from business as usual when Council Member Mike Metcalf asked, "Should we even be discussing this tonight?"

The November ballot in Moraga will put to public vote at least one and possibly two competing initiatives amending land development rules in town. If the Ordinance is modified before the election, any changes would apply to the land designated by the initiatives. If not, the old rules will remain in force for the duration of the initiative.

After an assertive speech by landowner Dave Bruzzone, who claimed that modifying the ordinance now was a clear attempt at tampering with his initiative on land development, Council Member Dave Trotter stated that the prospect of two land use initiatives on the

ballot was important enough to delay discussion on the Ordinance until January 2009. Council Member Bird was of the same opinion.

Council Member Ken Chew asked the Planning Commissioners who were present what they thought. Some of the Commissioners were somewhat disappointed that the previous recommendations they had made had not been taken into account. Some were of the opinion that obviously weak aspects of the text could be modified without interfering with future public vote, but all recognized that the work load was very high until the end of the year, especially for staff.

Mayor Deschambault indicated a desire to work on at least some aspects of the text so that progress could be claimed for the meeting, but she was not met with much support and the meeting was adjourned.