

Profound Differences on Governance Principles Interfere with Town's Operations

By Sophie Braccini

Definition of "dysfunctional:"* 1) failing to perform the function that is normally expected; 2) unable to function emotionally as a social unit; 3) unable to function normally as a result of disease or impairment. The drama that took place at the May 21st Moraga City Council meeting, caused some to wonder if that term could be applied to this elected body.

It was clear from the onset that profound philosophical differences split the Council, as a mirror to the town's population where liberals are neighbors to libertarians. The clash of personalities is such on the Council that the members have become unable to create a positive work environment. The result is hours of Council and staff time lost in unproductive arguments.

The late night discussion was engaged on how to select the Mayor. Last January, during the election of Mayor Lynda Deschambault, Council Member Metcalf challenged the unwritten rule that automatically rotates the mayorship every year according to the number of votes received by each candidate.

Metcalf pleaded for electing the most qualified candidate. "One of the specific roles of the Mayor is to conduct meetings," said the former Mayor, "some are cut out for that job and some are not, there should not be anything automatic about this election and we should select the most qualified."

"This rotation has been working properly for over thirty years," responded former Council Member Dale Walwark. "Our town has what is called a 'weak mayor' system with a Town Manager. The automatic rotation eliminates partisan arguments in the selection of the Mayor."

If all agreed that Moraga has a "weak mayor," some felt that the position was special enough to require a different type of election. Council Member Rochelle Bird offered a radical proposal: "The Mayor sets the agenda and represents the whole Council for external communication... I propose that the Mayor be elected directly by the people." This modification would require an initiative to go to the ballot.

Vice Mayor Dave Trotter and Deschambault both agreed to leave the rule unwritten so each Council could adapt to circumstances; they were supported by Council Member Ken Chew. The vote was 3 to 2, Bird and Metcalf opposed.

The drama went up a notch when the next issue on the agenda was reached, by midnight: a letter by Town Manager Vince to address rumors about the Mayor manipulating staff reports.

Prior to the April 30th joint meeting between Planning and Council, Bird had witnessed an incident in the Town office during which Planning Director Lori Salamack noticed that one of her reports had been modified without her knowledge.

When Bird questioned Town Manager Phil Vince, he confirmed that changes had been made according to requests by the Mayor. In a public statement, Vince explained that the modifications were only formal and that Mayors have reviewed documents at his request in the past. "These allegations of manipulations are nonsense," stated Vince.

"What is happening here is a disgrace," said the Mayor, referring to emails that had been circulated in town, "it is negatively affecting our com-

munity. We are spending time on non-issues when there is so much to do."

Metcalf didn't consider the issue trivial. "It is true," he confirmed, "that (as immediate past Mayor) I reviewed documents at the request of staff. But I do not think it is a good idea. It can lead to a perception of manipulation that's damaging to the trust the people need to have in their elected officials."

Council member Bird reiterated that she finds it unacceptable for a Mayor to see a report before the other members of the Council. Bird added that the Mayor also should not be solely responsible for setting the Council's agenda with the Town Manager.

This concern was echoed by property owner Dave Bruzzone, in reference to the 'Moraga Initiative Expanding Open Space and Residential Land Use Designations and adopting a Development Agreement,' the open space initiative favored by the Bruzzone family, "I now understand why our initiative was not put on the agenda in a timely manner." Bruzzone further questioned whether the staff report on his initiative had been modified.

"We need to get this out in the open," said Trotter, "this is therapy and things will get better."

"You need to govern yourself," urged the Town Manager, "adopt rules and regulations."

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