

A Dream for Moraga

By Sophie Braccini

“An exclusive and dramatically situated hideaway;” “One of the most beautiful and tranquil spaces in the buzzing East Bay;” “A microclimate of luxury.” Could these quotes refer to Moraga one day? This is the dream of one man, Joao Magalhaes, a twenty-year resident of Moraga with a lot of business acumen and a “2020 vision.”

On June 2nd the Economic Development Advisory Committee presented to the Town Council a report on the economic state of the town, after two years and 1400 hours of work. The picture is a city that does not offer its wealthy residents the shopping experience they want, a business community where large chain retailers derive 75% of their revenue from outside of Moraga and where many stores are vacant. Residents crave high-end products they can't find in town because the Moraga market is too small and because surrounding communities offer a more attractive shopping experience.

As Moraga sees a high risk of structural deficit and stagnant sales tax revenue, everyone is scrambling for ideas to revive the economic life in town. Members of the Chamber of Commerce launched “Shop Moraga First,” and the Town is engaged in Specific Plan discussions for the downtown area. At the end of their presentation to the Council, members of EDAC invited everyone to hear the plan of Joao Magalhaes.

Magalhaes, the former President of Bechtel Brazil, calls his plan “2020 vision.” “You need a long term plan, and benchmarks,” says Magalhaes. His benchmark is the Poetry Inn in Yountville, its Cliff Lede Vineyards and the art gallery located there as well.

Magalhaes is part of the Lamorinda Winegrower Association, a group consisting of more than seventy local winegrowers. He has researched the history of Moraga and discovered that more than one hundred twenty years ago the Christian Brothers, who founded St Mary's College, were encouraged to produce local alter wine. He read about Brother Timothy Diener, a pioneer in California wine making, who was the winemaker at Christian Brothers for more than fifty years.

“You could incorporate a spa, a bakery, a five-star restaurant and boutiques,” he says, “what counts is a choice of optimal quality that will attract discriminating customers and create a unique image for Moraga.”

The key partner in the project is the landowner. Different sites are viable for this grand vision in Moraga and Magalhaes is actively seeking property owners' support. “The idea would be to create a Special Purpose Company that would involve the main stake-holders, including the property owners, and preserve their interest,” explains a passionate Magalhaes. He envisions that the group would create the 2020 vision, its business plan and visuals, and then actively seek the right professionals to launch the bakery, hotel, spa, and winemaking that will constitute this new center.

Magalhaes has handled projects of even larger scope in his past, but does not want to be the main actor in this one. “I am retired now,” says Magalhaes, “I know investors and other interested parties. All I want is that my children and grand-children continue to have pride in the place they live in.”

The members of the Town Council and the Town staff are very interested in the idea. “There's no question that Joao's project appealed to all of the Council members,” said Vice-Mayor Dave Trotter. “It can and should be incorporated into the Moraga Center Specific Plan. With support of the property owner, the project could be a very attractive component at the heart of Moraga's new and revitalized downtown.”



Parkmon vineyard in Moraga

Photo Andy Scheck

Council member Mike Metcalf was just as positive, “I have discussed the winery concept a number of times. It's always seemed to me a perfect fit for Moraga, given (1) our agricultural heritage, (2) our growing number of earnest wine growers, and (3) an (apparent) appreciation by Moragans for good wine.” He too highlights the role of the property owner, “Clearly no winery project could ever fly without the enthusiastic support of the Bruzzone family, which owns the ideal location for such a project.”

Mayor Lynda Deschambault agrees, “The concept of a boutique winery and B&B is one that many have supported, including myself....now we need a real business plan, renderings, and buy-in from the landowners.”

“Developing Moraga as a destination is a way to complement declining retail sales tax revenue with Transient Occupancy Tax,” says Council member Ken Chew, “we need to look in that direction.”

“A lot of Joao's ideas are very attractive, and our family has had such dreams for many years,” says property owner Dave Bruzzone. “We want to have the ability to implement the developments this community needs, but zoning and political structures have impeded progress in the past. We have been trying to work with the Town, on the Specific Plan, to set up the framework that will allow exciting ideas and projects to take root and blossom. The Specific Plan shouldn't be about one specific idea but the opportunity for us as property owners, to entertain all the great ideas and then go with the best ones. A good Specific Plan makes accommodations for exciting opportunities and doesn't exact burdens and conditions that are barriers to entry. We need people like Joao, and all the others like him, who see what we saw years ago in Moraga, a special and unique place, a place worth your life's investment.”

The next meeting for the Specific Plan is scheduled for June 16th, in the La Sala Building of the Hacienda de las Flores; a presentation by the Dahlin Group is scheduled for July 9th during the Town Council meeting in the JM auditoriu.