

Jill Mercurio, Woman Working

By Sophie Braccini



Jill Mercurio in her office, in front of her "women working" road signs
Photo Sophie Braccini

The first thing you'll notice when meeting with Moraga's Town Engineer/Public Works Director Jill Mercurio is her friendly and warm smile. She's an engineer who is also a 'people person,' without compromising the rigorous working ways of her profession.

Mercurio was hired by former Town Manager Phil Vince two years ago. The Town had been subcontracting its engineering work, but the bills were growing too high. Vince was able to recruit Mercurio to a dual job, as both Town Engineer and Public Works Director, but it was clear that going after grant money was going to be one of her tasks.

Mercurio exceeded all expectations and within three years had raised two million dollars to finance needed improvements. "Jill is great at creating relationships with people. She did it with her staff and she did it with the agencies that issue grants," said Vince, "and best of all she can tackle the most arduous tasks while retaining the sense of humor that makes working with her such a pleasure."

A native of Maine, Mercurio knew from an early age that she wanted to be a civil engineer. She remembers the first time she got a surveying job during the summer "they gave me a pair of steel toe-boots, a machete and the mission to hack through the woods for surveying," she remembers, "I was perfectly happy."

Mercurio is mechanically and spatially inclined, she loves the outdoors and her biggest strength is long term planning, a perfect mix for a civil engineer. After graduation from Penn State Engineering School, a friend told her that she would enjoy the Bay Area. So she packed her bag, got in her small U-Haul with her big dog and headed west, sleeping in resting areas and surviving on coffee and peanut butter.

"I was glad I had my big dog for company," says Mercurio, "nights in rest areas can be a bit nerve wrecking for a single girl traveling." Once

in California she immediately got a job with Carollo Engineers in Walnut Creek.

After meeting her husband and wanting to start a family, she needed a position that wouldn't require her to travel all the time. She obtained a position in Concord as a senior civil engineer and was in charge of all construction and capital projects for six years. She was then recruited by Vince to come to Moraga, and says, "I love to work in this town, we get to tackle a wider variety of issues, and the people are wonderful to work with."

Her responsibility as a Public works Director has mostly to do with oversight, planning and budgeting. "Dan Bernie, the Public Work Superintendent, does extraordinary work with his team," she says.

Her engineering mandate takes most of her time. She manages all of the capital and development projects for Moraga. She enjoys applying for grants that will solve direct problems. "You don't go after grants just because the money is available," she explains, "it has to be a pre-existing project for the town. We have limited human resources; adding extra projects wouldn't make any sense." The most recent cases she worked on were grants to finance a stop light at Ascot Drive and Moraga Road, and to fund a sidewalk on Corliss, leading to Los Perales Elementary School.

One of Mercurio's largest tasks these past two years has been the management of the installation of the new EBMUD pipeline on Moraga Road, with the objective of minimizing the impact on the town and protecting the infrastructure. She started a "pavement deflection testing" a year ago. "It is the fairest way to measure degradation," says Mercurio of a process that measures how much the road bends under stress. This technique allows the assess damage in the underlying structure of the pavement, which is a big risk with heavy equipment working on the road for months. The first test was done a year ago, the second just before the work started and the third will be done afterwards. The three measures will give an accurate picture of what degradation has been done by the EBMUD project, once the natural passage of time is deducted.

Unfortunately, Moraga Road is not her only challenge. High on her list is the terrible condition of Rheem Boulevard. As of today, the rehabilitation project is on the five-year capital improvement project list, but with no date or money allocated. Altogether, the roads need \$8.4 million in work. "The best way is to get the design done and then look for additional funding," explains Mercurio. She is working with Ellen Tauscher to obtain federal funding for a Rheem Blvd. project.

Her other big concern is the storm drain system. "We had a big problem two years ago with a sink hole," she remembers, "we can't see the system and do not really know the state it is in. But I would rather know and plan for what has to be done." So Mercurio engaged in a videotaping of the whole drainage system that will give the town an accurate picture by fall. She will be working hard to plan and find resources to protect Moraga's infrastructure.