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Moraga Candidates to Town Council on Participatory Democracy

By Sophie Braccini

To a small town that's always articulated a desire for minimal government, the involvement of its citizens is crucial. Participatory democracy is the result, encompassing both volunteerism in groups that service the greater good, and active citizen participation in the decision making processes that affect the town. The six candidates seeking election to the Town Council this November are aware of the opportunities and challenges this creates.

"Moraga has always embraced the idea of minimal government, says Howard Harpham, who speaks from experience as President of Kiwanis, past President of our Park & Recreation Foundation, and member of the Historical Society and CERT, "Our vibrant, active community is supported not by government programs, but by volunteers who give their time and money to our many foundations, service organizations, commissions and private groups."

He is echoed by Janice Kolbe, who says, "The spirit of volunteerism... is the backbone of Moraga and what has contributed, more than almost anything else, to the strength and vitality of our community. As a result of Moraga's commitment to 'minimal government,' we have seen the growth of numerous foundations, service organizations, Town Commissions and volunteer groups by which our citizens have volunteered their time, energy and money to achieve things our town government could not otherwise accomplish."

Mike Metcalf has experienced Moraga's democracy first hand for the past four years, as Council member and Mayor in 2007; he says, "By choice and by necessity, Moraga has always been a small-government town. Were it not for the volunteerism of our citizens, many important things would not get done. Volunteerism is encouraged and people continue to respond with their labors and dollars. One can feel this on July 4th, the Pear Festival, and the summer concert series. It's not always the same people doing the work; many become involved in different ways. Community participation is everywhere, and the spirit is infectious. We're about people, family and friends, all living in a community we are proud to call home."

Harpham would like to see even more volunteerism, "To reduce Town expenditures on outside consultants, I propose the formation of a Moraga Professional Advisory Board; comprised of Moraga citizens with expertise in specialized areas such as engineering, law, finance and technology, selected by the Town Manager, they would assist our Town Staff whenever such expertise is needed. We can't completely eliminate consulting fees, but we can reduce them substantially by offering a new way to see 'participatory democracy' in action."

Kolbe adds an example of a committee that could be formed right now, "Moraga's seniors have recently petitioned the Council to create a Senior Services Commission, modeled after Lafayette's. The cost would be negligible, but it would facilitate the identification and response to the needs of the 20% of our residents who are over 60 years old."

Karen Mendoca, who has firsthand experience as a volunteer on the Parks and Recreation Commission, pushes the notion of participatory democracy beyond volunteerism, and praises the way citizens get involved in the decision making in town, "A participatory democracy invites citizens to make meaningful contributions to the decision-making process by directly taking part in that process. The Town of Moraga is a commendable example: citizens are encouraged to participate in all Town meetings, meetings are publicly noticed, communication networks and advocacy groups keep residents informed, the Town maintains a detailed website, and volunteerism is the solid cornerstone of our community."

Dennis Wanken agrees: "As a former Moraga School Board president and member, I could not agree more that we Moragans exemplify the true spirit and practice of participatory democracy. During the five years I served on the school board, one thing that could be counted on would be spirited and lively public comment and debate on public policy issues before the board. Participatory democracy is the essential mechanism by which we citizen stakeholders have our voices heard. We Moragans can truly be proud of ourselves by the letters we write to the editor, by our attendance at our local legislative meetings, and our spirit of volunteering in the many laudable venues of our community."

Metcalf adds, "People want to be informed, most want a say. Participation is encouraged. Public meetings truly are public forums, where people can voice their opinions and be heard. Sometimes it's difficult for Town leaders to digest what's been said and reach consensus, but it happens. This takes teamwork of elected leaders and citizens. That's participatory democracy."

Brad Kvederis, on the other hand, is skeptical when it comes to citizens' information and involvement, "Moraga has the potential to be a good participatory democracy, but falls short right now."

I'm glad our town is still small enough that one person can make his voice heard, but simply being small is a mixed blessing: Too often for a town our size, officials seem to be trying to guess what the citizens want, not acting on a clear mandate. In my door-to-door campaigning, many people I visited didn't even know there were big housing developments proposed right in their back yards. Sometimes, this disconnect is because our size makes large-scale, cohesive political activism difficult. Others, it's because the town ought to be more proactive about gathering input from the people and neighborhoods that its decisions affect - my own candidacy is a direct result of this. We need to be a lot more active in publicizing what's coming up before the Town Council, and make more use of the public referendum as a policymaking tool."

Mendoca agrees that citizen participation could be improved further. "If there is one area that could be improved, it is the way in which opinions are sometimes expressed," she says. "Passionate beliefs, if not checked, easily can give way to uncivil behavior and personal attacks. Each of us must be willing to engage in civil discourse that respects others' different points of view. It is essential that civic leaders themselves set a positive example and uphold behavioral norms that ensure a successful participatory democracy and the productive exchange of ideas."



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