

# LAMORINDA Community

## Participatory Democracy in Moraga

### A conversation with Cherie Grant

By Sophie Braccini



Cherie Grant Photo provided

Cherie Grant is very familiar with the community spirit that nourishes the life of the Town of Moraga. As a Council member and Mayor of the small town, and member of many community groups, she saw first-hand how local democracy thrives on the participation of the people. When she began to study the work of French political philosopher and analyst Alexis de Tocqueville, she was struck by the idea that his depiction of the early years of the American Republic resembled what happens on a smaller scale in Moraga. She decided to dig into the subject and produced a thesis called, "Grassroots Efforts In The Town Of Moraga In The Spirit Of Alexis de Tocqueville."

Grant says, "The principles of participatory democracy that Tocqueville described with enthusiasm are still very much alive in our town today. It dates back to the very creation of the Moraga entity in the early 70's. People were concerned to have decisions made about their town in Martinez and when development started to sprout around town there was a large grass root movement that led to the incorporation of the town." Sophie: Since the involvement is still going on today, what are the primary motivations of the residents?

Cherie: 90% of the issues were

and still are property issues, land use, property rights. We have different views of open space and land use that have been confronting each other for years.

Sophie: If we have such profound divisions, what makes us an efficient democracy?

Cherie: Because of geography, we have a better chance to talk to each other, even though we don't have a town center, we run into people all the time, we do not have a freeway running in the middle of town, it makes it a little more cohesive.

Sophie: The other large component of participatory democracy, as described by Tocqueville, is the important amount of volunteerism that people give to their town; how is volunteerism doing in Moraga?

Cherie: Moraga is basically a town that is run by volunteers, all our commissions, the Town Council, work for absolutely no money, and that's what built America from its beginning, it volunteerism. The equality of condition and economic homogeneity we have here makes it easier.

Sophie: To make the right decision, citizens need to be informed; do you think that Moragans are informed enough?

Cherie: Things have become so complex that issues are sometimes hard to grasp. One of the reasons we went small was to make things easy, but now even small is very complex, regulations, traffic studies, people feel helpless. May be they feel it is harder to have an impact. Tocqueville said people were active because they could have an impact. That's why a group like Moraga Citizens Network is important. They have changed things in town; people who had never been able to go to meetings are now involved thanks to that

group and participate in local actions. There are many new ways for people to get information like list-serves, or blogs on different subjects. The infrastructure to circulate the information is there, but too many don't see the need of getting involved. There is a core group, 50 people or so, who really care. New people in town sometimes just assume that everything is fine and they trust the five people on the Council.

Sophie: Current Mayor Lynda Deschambault made participatory democracy and circulation of information one of her main campaign objectives; did she succeed?

Cherie: "She's truly a pioneer, she tried to have everything online, she sends emails, and spreads information in town. I'm not sure it has increased participation as much as she would have wanted it to be. It is work, and people are busy."

Sophie: In his essay, Tocqueville attributed a part of the success of the democratic process to "the superiority of their women;" does the gender of a candidate make a difference?

Cherie: Women bring something different to the table, we can't neglect gender; we need a mix. In our area our women are very confident. They are "the back bone of the community" and they are making a difference every day.

Sophie: You talk a lot about the citizens' involvement in the area of sustainability; why?

Cherie: That's the thing that will bring the whole community together. The campus is doing it, it is a global quest, we are all concerned for our children and ourselves. Why would we want to make our town a lesser community for future generations? The issue transcends democrats, republicans; it's a fabulous opportunity to pull us together.

Sophie: What improvement

would you like to see in participatory democracy?

Cherie: The college and the town need to come together more; we need a town center where people can meet, a fun place, a town square where we discuss idea. That physical meeting place could be the Hacienda with some improvements.

Sophie: As you conducted your studies, what surprised you the most?

Cherie: What surprised me the most was the commitment to the town that some people have made for more than 30 years, or others like Parents for a Safer Environment who spend countless hours of outreach and research to protect our children from harm. I knew the spirit of volunteerism was strong, I was surprised to find it so powerful and widespread.

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## Public Forum JOIN IT

### Voters of Moraga – Vote NO on J and NO on K

By Steve Woehleke, Dale Walwark, and Bob Reynolds

Competing special interests have placed two initiatives, Measures J and K, on the fall ballot in Moraga. If passed, their re-write of Moraga land-use policy will impose their view of the future of Moraga land-use and planning on all of us. And, the permanent changes almost certainly will result in expensive litigation the Town must defend, at your expense, with a reduction in Town services. This is a very bad idea. Your NO vote on both J and K is essential to the future of Moraga.

Together with land-use restrictions in place since 1986, Moraga has evolved a planning process that has served the community very well. Ridgelines and open spaces are protected. Environmental issues are thoroughly considered. Local control is firmly established. There is lots of opportunity for input from neighbors and the community. The limited new home construction we have seen is compatible with our attractive community. Most of us see little that needs to be fixed.

However, others may see a need for Moraga land-use policy change. We do not resist it. But, if changes are needed, we believe they should be determined in Moraga's established General Plan process, deliberative decision making with ample opportunity for dialog among landowners, citizens, and professionals. Up-front discussions should focus on consideration of alternatives and assessment of implications. Instead of Moraga's normal balanced and deliberative process, special interests have plunked down the two take-it-or-leave-it packages of permanent regulations, the full implications of which may not be known until it is too late. Regulations set by initiative can only be changed by another initiative or by the courts.

An almost certain result of passage of either of these measures will be legal challenge, expensive litigation that the Town of Moraga will be forced to defend with your money. It is unfortunate that the Initiative process saddles the Town (i.e., you) with the legal bills, not the proponents. We all know that litigation is expensive but we don't know how expensive. The cost is open-ended and unknowable until the process is well underway.

The problem is that the Town of Moraga is basically broke. All revenues are being used for costs, and we face structural deficits in the years to come. There is no extra money to pay the expected legal bills. There isn't even enough to pay for continuation of current services. And, we can't raise taxes.

Thus, the cost of litigation must be taken away from Town services, police, parks, recreation, roads, public safety, and other. Do you want to sacrifice police protection in exchange for expensive lawyers to defend special interests? The Town will have no choice if these measures pass and become law. Compromise is not possible if either initiative passes.

We do not question the business interests or the motivations of initiative proponents. They are local people and they want what they want.

We strongly question the implications of the words on the paper of the take-it-or-leave initiatives without deliberation or discussion. On your ballot, you will see 12 to 17 words. You can only say Yes or No. Behind these 12 to 17 words are 25 to 30 pages of dense legal initiative language that required about 25,000 words each for Town staff and lawyers to interpret. We strongly urge you to vote NO on both J and K unless you have studied every word of the measures, understand their meaning and implications, and agree it is all, in its entirety, good for you and for Moraga.

Your NO vote on both on J and K will mean Moraga will retain local control under its time-tested land-use policies and its effective planning process. Ridgelines and open spaces will continue to be protected as they have been for more than 20 years.

Your NO vote on both J and K can also be the starting point for a sensible informed discussion of the future of land-use policy and planning in Moraga, done the way it ought to be done, a dialog among citizens, professionals, and landowners with deliberation, discussion, and ample public input.

Finally, some people have told us they don't like either of these initiatives but think they have to choose between the lesser of evils.

There is a third choice, a better choice. Choose no evil at all -- Vote No on both J and K.

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