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## On the Razor's Edge: Moraga's 2008-2009 budget

By *Sophie Braccini*

Moraga's Town Council praised staff on December 3rd for great work in balancing the Town's budget under difficult circumstances, while still finding funding for an additional police officer. However, everyone was aware that the fragile equilibrium could be compromised when and if the State of California acts to compensate for its \$20 billion deficit. "We are amongst the smallest fishes in the pond," said Finance Director Joan Streit, commenting on Moraga's position in the hierarchy of public agencies, "when the State declares a 'state of emergency' it can 'borrow' from us sums that we may never see again."

Interim Town Manager Jay Tashiro and Streit had to find financial solutions for a decreased income, while the Council requested funding for an additional police officer. Moraga Police counts 12 officers + 1 whose salary is paid by COPS (Citizens Options for Public Safety), a State fund that could be on the chopping block. At the same time, Moraga's net income decreased by more than \$200,000, due to lost sales tax among other issues.

During the past few months, Town staff has suffered serious attrition. The solution for additional money was found there: by not replacing and/or downgrading the vacant positions. For example, the Human Resources manager will not be replaced and neither will the Town Clerk. Instead a position will be created for a Clerk/Assistant to the Town Manager. The Assistant to the Planning Director will be replaced by an administrative clerk. Additional cuts have been made in projects to make ends meet.

"If we lose more funding from the State, we will have to re-evaluate the level of service the residents are getting from staff," warned Streit.

Council member Rochelle Bird, who did not run for re-election, asked that the Council lead by example and freeze all of their travel expenses.

Mayor Linda Deschambault, whose term is also ending, argued that the expense was inconsequential (less than 0.2% of the budget) while the learning experience that Council Members get can benefit the town. A majority of the Council agreed of the importance of a symbolic gesture and manufactured a lengthy amendment authorizing only local conferences and some training for the two new Council Members, Karen Mendonca and Howard Harpham.

Members of the public questioned the viability of this iteration of the budget, arguing that cuts by the State were very likely and that the budgetary health of Moraga was compromised in the long term, with a deficit projected as early as 2010.

Streit emphasized once more the need for the Town to diversify its revenue sources and not be so dependent on outside income streams.

Edy Schwartz, President of the Chamber of Commerce, took the opportunity to plea for greater support by the Town of its business community, including the use of the Town marquee for publicizing events, participation of elected officials in Chamber actions and streamlining of the permit process for new businesses.

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