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Where the Real Work is Done

By Sophie Braccini

Have you ever been to a Moraga Town Council meeting, seen the members sitting next to each other, facing the audience and wondered how real work could be achieved in such an arena? The effort it takes to craft policies and make complex choices requires a setting more conducive to work. That's why the Town has a staff and, when matters need to be discussed among different constituencies, subcommittees are created. One of them that is active at this time is the Moraga Center Specific Plan Development Standards Subcommittee. Its purpose is to create a 20 dwelling unit per acre district in the area where the Specific Plan is focused; an area that is presently designated as six dwellings per acre. The members of the subcommittee represent most of the stakeholders. Town staff members are Planning Director Lori Salamack and Town Manager Mike Segrest; Mayor Dave Trotter and Council Member Mike Metcalf represent the Town Council; two members of both the Design Review Board and the Planning Commission participate; finally, the owner of most of the land affected by the Specific Plan, the Bruzzone family with consultant Dick Loewke, are there to negotiate their terms. They meet around an oval table in the Meeting Room of the library every Monday evening and attempt to resolve possible differences in a courteous manner. The meetings are public, but word of scheduled sessions rarely reaches residents. Only full-blown committee and commission meetings have their own listing on the Town's web site with their respective agendas and minutes. The meetings of this subcommittee are posted under the Moraga Specific Plan heading on the Town's homepage. The group has met every Monday evening from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. (with the exception of October 12), and will continue to do so until the building standards are approved by all. A plan will then be submitted to the Town Council for final blessing. Meeting notices can be found at http://moraga.ca.us/production/moraga_moraga_center_specific_plan.php. At the October 5 meeting it was clear that all the participants were moving in the same direction, fine tuning the last details. The subcommittee members are in agreement that the Specific Plan area should be designated as a minimum of 20 dwelling units per acre rather than 6, with up to 30 units per acre when senior assisted housing is included. A request from Loewke that the maximum be upgraded to 33 units per acre when some of the units do not have cooking facilities was accepted by all. The document allows for three-story buildings with a maximum height of 45 feet. A few elements are still contentious. For example, the Bruzzone family believes, based on figures from recent upscale developments, that a number of .7 parking spaces per unit are sufficient, while Salamack believes that one parking space per unit would fit Moraga better. Another discussion involved green building requirements. The approval process includes an obligation for the developer to provide "a description of sustainable practices to be used in the development of the project, including how the development will comply with the Town's green building requirements." Loewke said, "If the green building requirements are not an ordinance, they should not be imposed on us." According to Planning Director Lori Salamack, only polishing remains to be done and the Specific Plan could be approved by the Council before the end of the year.

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