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Moraga's Survey Says...

By Andrea A. Firth

Vacancies in Rheem Center, the blight in Moraga Center, the deterioration of streets and roads, a cumbersome planning process, and the untapped economic opportunity represented by Saint Mary's College-these were the areas of concern registered by Moraga residents who recently participated in focus groups and an online survey conducted by RECON, Moraga's Revenue Enhancement Community Outreach to Neighborhoods.

RECON, an offshoot of the Town's Revenue Enhancement Committee, was formed to determine the community's knowledge of the challenges facing the town and what to do about them. The all-volunteer committee included Dick Olsen, chair of the Revenue Enhancement Committee, and consultants with expertise in survey tools and analysis including former Saint Mary's professor Dr. Larry Bienati, and Moraga residents Maridel Mouton and Kathey Ferber. RECON conducted six focus groups with seven to ten randomly-selected resident voters and collected online surveys from 650 respondents.

The majority of participants felt positively about living and working in Moraga and identified the high quality of the schools, the semi-rural setting, and small town feel as things they value most about the town. Safety and minimal crime, the people and neighborhoods, community and recreation amenities and events were other elements they cited as important. But, while residents appreciated Moraga's small town nature, they also identified the need to strike a balance between the need for economic development and maintaining this core value.

The Town Council was concerned by the residents' admitted lack of knowledge regarding the town's financial condition and infrastructure needs. "The gaping hole here is related to the town's infrastructure needs," stated Council Member Dave Trotter. "The neighborhood streets are suffering, " he added, advocating that the Council begin to appropriate funds to conduct an engineering study as the first step towards quantifying the problem and creating a financing plan to address the problem.

One of the most profound pieces of information to come out of the RECON process, according to Olsen, was the fact that residents were open-minded, or possibly willing, to pay to address town services, such as streets and storm drains, that are at risk. The majority of those surveyed (34% saying yes and 50% responding maybe) would consider paying more in taxes or fees to address these needs. Town Manager Mike Segrest supported the need for greater outreach to educate the community before pursuing a ballot measure for a benefit assessment district to finance the infrastructure costs. Council Member Mike Metcalf concurred, stating, "We've got to go out and engage residents through face-to-face interactions."

The Council subcommittee comprised of Metcalf and Howard Harpham will come back to the full Council in October with concepts for communicating the recommendations of the Revenue Enhancement Committee. In addition, the Council decided to pursue the Committee's recommendation to establish an Economic Development Director to facilitate the revitalization of the town's retail areas and foster the economic partnership with Saint Mary's College (see Wanted Economic Development Director-Volunteer Needed)

Wanted Economic Development Director-Volunteer Needed

Moraga is seeking a volunteer to serve as the Economic Development Director for the town. With the aim to promote the economic health of the town, the individual will be charged to promote retail, support existing businesses and attract new ones, and improve the relationship with Saint Mary's College. With residents complaining about the many store vacancies and limited retail options available, the Director is expected to play an active role in the revitalization of the Rheem Center and facilitating the implementation of the Moraga Center Specific Plan. The volunteer position is expected to require approximately 10 hours per week and will be afforded a flexible work schedule and office space and support at the Town offices. A link to a complete job description can be found at the town website homepage, www.moraga.ca.us.

The idea to have a paid employee to serve as the Economic Development Director was initially recommended by the town's Revenue Enhancement Committee. With no budget to support the post but the belief that the community has residents with sufficient expertise and volunteer willingness, the Town Council voted unanimously to recruit a volunteer for the position. "It's an experiment, a first step, and not necessarily the final step in this process," stated Council Member Dave Trotter.

The Director will be expected to formulate economic development strategies, work with existing businesses to improve growth, negotiate with potential new businesses, serve as a liaison between town department's and businesses, and generate economic analytical and status reports. "I feel one of the most important things this person would do is to coalesce the town's economic vision," said Edy Schwartz, President of Moraga's Chamber of Commerce.

"We must have this person work through the Town Manager. Accountability to the Town Council is essential. The individual has a lot of potential to impact the town in a positive way," stated Council Member Mike Metcalf. The Economic Development Director will report to the Town Manager and provide the Town Council with regular updates. An ad hoc advisory committee including Edy Schwartz, Tim Farley (Saint Mary's College), Larry Tessler, Joao Magalhaes, Frank Melon (Moraga Country Club), Mike Lawrence, and Fred Schroeder will also provide the Director

with guidance.

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