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Economic Development: "Boots on the Ground"

By *Sophie Braccini*

"It's time to put boots on the ground," said Economic Development Team member Renee Zeimer during the Team's presentation at the Moraga Town Council meeting on March 9. The Team hit the ground running upon its inception last October, surveying residents, analyzing existing data, and engaging property owners, businesses and developers. But studying the situation is not enough; the Team wants an action-oriented body that will assist it in meeting its goals. The Council thanked team members for their work and approved the creation of an ad-hoc public committee.

The Revenue Enhancement Committee created the Economic Development Team at the end of 2009. It is composed of three volunteers who give the Town about 10 hours of work a week to promote the economic health of the community. In addition to Zeimer, the Team includes Mary Coe and Rich Larsen. They were given two additional goals for 2011: 1) to create a Town-wide commercial ordinance that streamlines community supported retail, office and other commercial business; and, 2) to assist in the revitalization of the Rheem Valley Shopping Center and adjacent commercial areas.

Town Manager Jill Keimach explained the issue during a conversation last February. "In Moraga there is huge uncertainty, from an applicant's point of view, about how long the process will take for businesses applying for a permit," she said, "We need to define the permitted uses that the community wants and streamline the process for those businesses. Then for other types businesses, the potential business owners will know that they will have to engage in a lengthier permit process that includes public comment and review."

Defining these permitted uses and drafting that ordinance is one of the Team's goals. "We ask the Town Council to approve the creation of an Economic Development Action Committee," said Zeimer, "this new committee will assist in outreach to and inclusion of property owners, existing and prospective businesses, and the community at-large." According to its charter, the Committee will not only assist in drafting a commercial ordinance, it will also recommend strategies for the revitalization of the Rheem Center.

"We would like to conduct a town-wide visioning process to discuss the future of the Rheem Center," explained Zeimer, "and to do so we are thinking about using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) techniques." The basic idea of AI inventors David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivatsa is to build organizations around what works, rather than trying to fix what doesn't. They claim that organizations that try to appreciate what is best in themselves will identify more and more of what is good, while those that focus on dysfunctions will reproduce the problems.

The Council approved the creation of the Action Committee and decided it may have as many as 13 members, including up to four members of the community at large. The Council will be represented on the Committee, which will meet monthly, by Ken Chew and Howard Harpham.

Economic

Development Survey

Moraga residents were recently asked by the Economic Development Team to complete an anonymous, voluntary, online survey; 439 residents participated:

31% were ages 35- 44; 26% were 45-54; 16% were 55- 64; and 21% were 65 or older. 65% of the respondents were female, 59% had kids living at home.

The survey asked questions regarding where residents get their information about the Town (86% of respondents cited the Lamorinda Weekly), and included open-ended questions about the retail experience and business climate in Moraga. More varied restaurants, a sports bar, a Trader Joe's (or other produce market), and a bookstore were among the types of retail suggested. As far as revitalization is concerned, many residents highlighted the need for a vision, a business-friendly atmosphere in town, and more attractive, student-friendly stores.

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