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Action Team Charts Ambitious Course

By Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Economic Development Action Team has given itself five months to set in motion what others have only attempted to study. By September, the Team plans to meet two goals: write a retail ordinance that will give predictability of outcome to businesses that are applying for a use permit in Moraga, and engage partners in the revitalization of the Rheem Center. Team members will meet the third Wednesday evening of every month, and will be doing a lot of homework between meetings.

"Whatever plan is sketched by the Town or (the Team), it will take the business owners' buy-in to become a reality," commented commercial real estate broker and Team member Dave Schnayer, who also represents Kimco Realty, the company that owns the majority of the Rheem Center. Schnayer brings the property owner's perspective to the table, as well as his past experience as the property manager of the Rheem Center, "three owners ago," he recalled. One possible plan to revive the shopping center that sports a plethora of "For Lease" signs was mentioned by Team member Hollie Lucas-Alcalay at a recent meeting. "The Town has overbuilt retail," she said, "are we setting these (new) businesses up for failure if we don't have the population to support them?" She wondered if it might be time to explore other options, such as mix-use for the Center. Planning Director Lori Salamack concurred, but Town Council Member Howard Harpham noted, "The owners may already have a strategy; we are not working with a blank slate."

After the meeting, Schnayer explained that there are at least seven different property owners in the Rheem Center that are bound together by commercial contracts that define the use of the Center, despite any new zoning the Town might approve. However, "the property owners can't do it alone, and commercial real estate can't do it alone either," added Schnayer.

According to Team member Renee Zeimer, the Town needs a vision. "We need to define what we want to see happen," she said, "Since the community does not want to grow, we have to become a destination, give people a reason to take that road."

The first concrete task the Team is taking on is the drafting of a retail ordinance. During previous discussions, Town Manager Jill Keimach indicated that the purpose of such an ordinance would be to define acceptable business uses for the Town, so businesses that fit the definition would be able to get a use permit 'over the counter'; while less obvious businesses would have to go through a more complex process. "The ordinance will remove the uncertainty that presently can make the process frustrating," she said.

The next Team meeting will be on May 18 at 7:00 p.m. at the Hacienda de las Flores.

New Businesses at Rheem?

News of a produce store coming to the Rheem Center has come and gone over the past few months. The offspring of Walnut Creek Produce, on Olympic Boulevard, is back according to commercial real estate broker Dave Schnayer. "The deal is not done," he said recently, "but it is very close." Schnayer indicated that the property owners will want to work with the local community, from the farmers on the supply side, to restaurants and senior facilities on the consumer side. Schnayer also confirmed that he is working with a Moraga family interested in opening a frozen yogurt store next to Lamorinda Pizza. "Those would be great additions to the Center," he said.

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