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A Chamber the Council Can Call its Own?

By *Sophie Braccini*

For many years, the Moraga Town Council has held its public meetings in the auditorium at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. The venue was once made available to the Council at no charge, but that changed when the Town decided to stop paying a portion of the maintenance costs for the Moraga School District's sports fields and suggested to the district's governing board that the fields' various users should be responsible for their upkeep. Since what's good for the goose is good for the gander, the district now charges the Town a use fee for the auditorium.

Moraga Town Manager Jill Keimach saw the current seismic retrofitting of the Town's office building at 329 Rheem Boulevard as a cost-effective opportunity to add a Council Chamber to the building so the Town could hold its public meetings free of rent. "Assuming long-term average rent and personnel/overtime costs increase three percent per year, the (current) annual cost of \$14,280 compounds to \$163,704 in ten years," said Keimach of the use fee charged for the school auditorium.

Keimach presented five variations of a chamber-building plan to the Town Council on May 11 and asked council members to select two, which could be brought back for further discussion and financing strategy. Some members of the council indicated that spending money for a meeting room was not wise at this time, when Moraga residents are likely to be asked to make financial contributions for such things as infrastructure maintenance in the near future (see sidebar).

Most Town staff, including the police, are housed in the building at 329 Rheem. Keimach's proposal would be to reconfigure the first floor to add a large meeting room. Option (a) with 77 seats would add \$170,000 to the cost of the retrofit and option (b) with 105 seats, would add \$260,000. "Since we are doing the seismic retrofit, reconfiguring the space at this time is very cost effective," said Keimach. She added that 90% of council meetings attract less than 60 people. "The downside of Rheem is parking," noted Keimach, "we would have to negotiate an agreement with the owners of the large parking areas across the street."

The other Town properties studied were the Hacienda de las Flores and the library. Both were rejected for reasons of mix-use and/or building cost.

Council members were divided on the issue. "Let's ask the Rheem Theater, Saint Mary's College or Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church (for meeting space) before spending that kind of money," said Council Member Howard Harpham. "I have a problem about spending a quarter of a million dollars when we need to repair pot holes," added Council Member Dave Trotter. "I'm concerned about the cost," agreed Vice Mayor Mike Metcalf, "we should challenge Jill (Keimach) to try to develop it a bit smaller and identify funding ideas."

Mayor Karen Mendonca and Council Member Ken Chew supported building the larger meeting room of option (b). Mendonca later explained, "I believe in the Buster Brown Shoes philosophy my parents taught me as a kid," she said, "if you get it cheap, you have to buy it again and it ends up costing more."

Keimach is hoping to bring the project back to the Council at the end of June or early July, complete with financing options. "If the decision for the retrofit is made this summer, the drawings will be done in the fall, and after the permits are issued, construction should start in the spring of 2012," she said.

60% of Moraga Voters Support Pot Hole Measure

Late last week, Godge Research released the results of a study commissioned by the Town of Moraga to assess residents' priorities in the areas of infrastructure maintenance, streets and storm drains. With a 5.6 percent margin of error, the results show that voters are either definitely (33 percent) or probably (27 percent) in favor of a potential measure for pothole and neighborhood street repairs.

300 potential voters, selected as being representative of the population as a whole, were surveyed between March 26 and April 1st. "Given the 60 percent base of support among voters for a Moraga Pothole and Repair Measure, we believe that the Town of Moraga should continue the process," concluded the Consultant's executive summary. Predictions are that without a measure to finance repairs, the condition of Moraga's streets and roads will decline and the cost of repairs will increase by 300 percent in 10 years.

The next phase of this project will be for the Town to engage in community outreach regarding street repairs and maintenance issues. S.Braccini

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