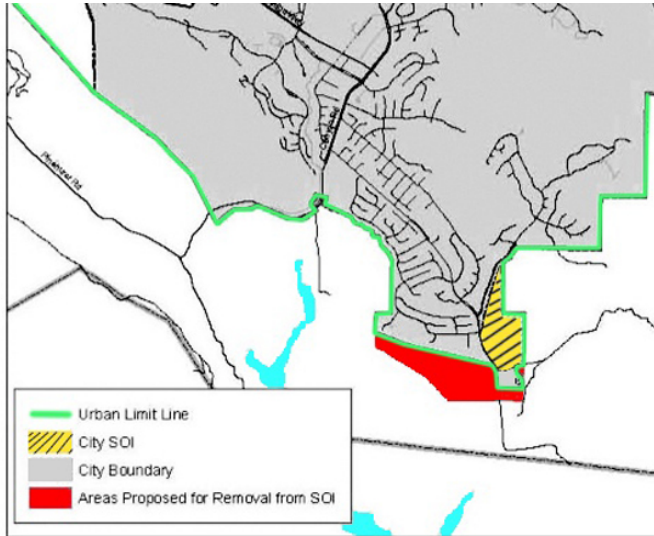


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Moraga's Sphere of Influence Town has little control over large projects in some nearby unincorporated areas, such as those near Rancho Laguna Park

By *Sophie Braccini*

Map courtesy Moraga Planning Department

buy the Hacienda de las Flores property, determined boundaries that included the property which would later become Rancho Laguna Park, but left out the Carr Ranch lands and other open space properties surrounding the park-creating a strange map with a little pocket at its south-east border (see image).

Years later, when a piece of Carr Ranch was sold to developers for the Skyline subdivision, the Town objected to plans for a density of more than two dwellings per acre. "The County Planning Department agreed with the Town," remembers Chamberlain, "but the developer appealed the decision to the County Board of Supervisors, which overruled the decision. When the Town complained, the response was that the area was not within the Town's sphere of influence."

Typically, a sphere of influence is the territory a city or district is expected to annex. The Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) regulates spheres of influence (SOI). According to its mission statement, "LAFCO must adopt a sphere of influence (SOI) for each city and special district...The SOI serves as the ultimate planning boundary for a local agency." LAFCO reviews SOIs at least once every five years.

The Skyline issue prompted Moraga's then Planning Director, Jay Tashiro, to create a SOI for the Town. "We wanted to expand it to include Canyon and the unincorporated Bollinger area, but this was met with vehement opposition from the property owners," says Chamberlain. The SOI was therefore limited to what appears on the map pictured.

The Town has a say when subdivisions are proposed within its SOI, but its regulatory power is limited beyond the actual Town borders. "We typically do not see the plans or how each parcel is developed," says Chamberlain. Hence the Town could not stop the ridgeline development to west of the park; the subdivision of that land was determined prior to Moraga's SOI. In 2009 LAFCO removed that area west of Camino Pablo from the Town's SOI because, according to LAFCO's Director Lou-Ann Texeira, "the area is open space, there is no opportunity for the Town of Moraga to develop the land and extend its services there." Most of the lots that were created have already been built.

Moraga's current SOI includes only the Skyline development and the undeveloped hills that border Camino Pablo to the east between Rancho Laguna Park and Sanders Ranch. "We should not see more development up there," said Chamberlain, referring to the open space located all around Rancho Laguna Park, both within and beyond the Town's SOI, because "the rest of the land is part of EBMUD watershed."

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Moraga has precise rules when it comes to building on open space, such as those limiting density and protecting ridgelines. Yet, near Rancho Laguna Park, grand homes stand on ridgelines to the west and stately dwellings exist in a densely-built subdivision-the Skyline development-just north of the park. A bit of Moraga history sheds light on how this came to be, and what the future may hold.

Moraga's Senior Planner, Rich Chamberlain, has a finely-honed understanding of the situation. "One of the key reasons why Moraga residents voted to incorporate the Town in 1974 was to be able to control the development process," he explains. Prior to incorporation, projects were approved by the County Planning Department; and although the Moraga area had an advisory body that made recommendations to the County, these recommendations were at times ignored.

"One of the challenges of incorporation was to design the boundaries of the Town," recalls Chamberlain "It was a balancing act between what the Town wanted to control and the amount of space and roads it would be able to maintain."

The Moraga Parks and Recreation Foundation, which was formed to