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## New in Town: Shawna Brekke-Read Moraga's Planning Department

By Sophie Braccini



Shawna Brekke-Read in her new office at 329 Rheem Photo Sophie Braccini

Moraga's new Planning Director, Shawna Brekke-Read, is an experienced planner who enjoys a good challenge and specializes in working with stakeholders who bring very different perspectives to the table.

The mother of two teenagers who attend Miramonte High School, Brekke-Read has worked as a planning consultant in Orinda and Lafayette (among other communities), and often mingles in Moraga where her husband, Don Read, is a popular teacher at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School (JM). She brings a fresh look, an inclusive personality, and high hopes for a town that she believes has unique potential.

Brekke-Read comes from an Oakland family of eight children. She worked in her father's business, Brekke's Cafeteria, from age nine until she left for college. As a young woman she cooked in restaurants to support herself during college, but decided that this was not her calling. Instead, having lived in Oakland all her life and witnessing the disintegration of the social fabric of that community, she decided to pursue a career in city management. "One of my older brothers studied political science and introduced me to the way cities operate," she remembers, "then I had professors and mentors who confirmed that city planning was what I was meant to do and where I could apply myself to make cities better places to live."

Brekke-Read sees the role of a planning director as someone who enacts the will of the community and works for the benefit of the whole town. As far as process is concerned, she thinks that approval processes in Moraga should be streamlined, but should also empower the Town Council and Planning Commission to respond to the community's needs.

Brekke-Read was interested in the Moraga opening because it is her understanding that a lot of things are happening in the little town. "Moraga's greatest asset is that it's off the beaten path," she says, "People like going to such places; its location far from the freeway is an opportunity and Moraga has a lot going for itself, including Saint Mary's College."

"I've been telling her for years that she would have a great time here," says Don Read, "and she agreed with me when she came on the European field trip (that Read runs for JM students) and met the students and some parents. She is very excited about her new job; it dovetails nicely with what she's done previously."

In her early career, Brekke-Read was Interim Planning Director for the City of Oakley and Community Development Director in Susanville for five years. She also worked as the Administrative Director for the Oakland Heritage Alliance and, in that capacity, initiated the committee to preserve the Fox Theater. When her children were born she started her own consulting business, working part time while advocating for Oakland schools.

"My business often focused on projects that were a bit more controversial," says Brekke-Read, "I liked the challenge of it." These experiences solidified her belief that taking into account the community's perspective from the onset and working collaboratively helps establish consensus-driven solutions.

"When I worked in Susanville (in northeast California) we obtained a grant to restore a creek," recalls Brekke-Read, "There were many stakeholders impacted by the project, ranchers, environmentalists, residents, industry owners. Each of them had a different agenda and was convinced that none of the others would understand where they were coming from." She met with all of them, listened to their concerns and managed to get all of them to realize that, beyond their differences, they would all benefit from a healthier creek.

Another recent, controversial project she worked on was the construction of a hotel in Berkeley. "The neighbors were concerned with the visual impact of the new project, with loss of privacy, and they had parking concerns, too," says Brekke-Read, "the staff report identified all of residents' concerns, and since the zoning called for a conditional use permit, the project needed to be compliant with the General Plan." It took only three meetings to mitigate the impacts and work out an approval. "The original plan changed significantly," she said, "some people were still dissatisfied with three stories, but we addressed most of the concerns through the conditions of approval."

The new Planning Director is enthused by the energy of the Economic Development Action Team and its plans for the Rheem Center. "There are other municipalities in the Bay Area that have re-imagined old shopping centers to create a successful downtown, such as

Healdsburg," she says. At press time, Brekke-Read hoped to participate to the Community Workshop to Create a Vision for Rheem on August 27 and 29 - a great opportunity to start getting a feel for what the community wants

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