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Planning, Deciding, Developing - Moraga Joins Forces for Economic Vitality

By Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Town Council and the Planning Commission got together on November 30th to hear the Economic Development Action Team's (EDAT) report on the Rheem Center and to approve the recommendations of the Team so staff can move forward. More than ever, reviving the Rheem Center is at the forefront of concerns. Moraga's new Planning Director, Shawna Brekke-Read, reframed the question to include it in a global rethinking of the General Plan that would benefit the whole town.

EDAT presented the results of seven months of work. The Team had been tasked with finding ways to revitalize the Rheem Valley area-the shopping center and surrounding lots along Moraga Road-and streamlining the approval process for community supported retail.

One piece of the engine that will move the Town forward was not included in the elaboration of the EDAT's plan: the property owners. None of the owners of retail property in the Rheem area participated in the discussion.

From the Team's work, a vision for the Rheem Center area emerged, developed from the public input sessions that were organized last August. EDAT identified four action items that most residents believe are needed: Improvement of the pedestrian experience and approach, creation of gathering places, expansion of the retail variety, and broader diversity of land use.

For each of these aspects, EDAT proposed short, medium and long-term plans. "We are the third task force appointed to propose actions geared at improving the business climate of the town," said EDAT's Hollie Lucas-Alcalay, "we want some projects to start now so the residents can start seeing improvements." The report proposes beautification projects such as reconfiguring and replanting the concrete planters to break-up the perspective, and starting to apply for grants for pedestrian and bicycle circulation.

The medium term would include amendment of the General Plan, streetscape and signage upgrades, and a marketing plan to support business owners.

For the long term, EDAT proposes the study of a strategic plan for the area.

The Team also recommended that a part time Economic Development Coordinator be hired to drive the proposed actions. Both the Council and the Commission supported the idea, pending the identification of a viable funding source. After the meeting, Keimach indicated that recommendation would be reviewed by the Council at its mid-year budget review in February.

Both the bodies also approved the Planning Director's proposal to start a review of the General Plan that should address some of the main hindrances to economic development. "If that is your recommendation, go for it," said Vice Mayor Mike Metcalf, "but it will take a lot of drive to reach that goal." Metcalf referred to many wide reaching plans that took years to achieve because Planning Directors get bogged down by ongoing business.

"This makes a lot of sense to me," said Planning Commission Vice Chair Dick Socolich, "this will provide the framework under which we will later develop a Rheem Specific Plan."

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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