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Passing the Gavel, with a Twist

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Mayor Mike Metcalf, Vice Mayor Howard Harpham, and immediate past Mayor Karen Mendonca, who holds a plaque and gavel she received as a gift. Photo Sophie Braccini

Very late in the evening on December 14 the Moraga Town Council embarked on its annual reorganization process, and the determination of who would serve as the next Mayor and Vice Mayor. Predictably, Vice Mayor Michael Metcalf was nominated to become Mayor and elected by his peers unanimously. The evening's surprise came with the nomination and election of the Vice Mayor. An unwritten tradition, which sends the highest vote-getter to the gavel via the Vice Mayor's seat, was broken when Council Member Howard Harpham was elected Vice Mayor.

"It's been a privilege to serve the Town as Mayor," said Karen Mendonca, concluding her mayoral year. "I owe a lot of gratitude to our Town Manager Jill Keimach, the very competent department heads and great staff."

Vice Mayor Metcalf was then elected to the Mayor's seat and he and Mendonca switched chairs, passing

the gavel. Metcalf has been preparing to take the helm.

"I have met with Jill (Keimach) and discussed my list of objectives for the year," he said, "she met with her department heads to assess what they thought was feasible." Metcalf presented a list of detailed objectives within several categories: Secure a revenue measure of some type for the roads; improve parks and recreation infrastructure; finalize the plan for the Town offices; maintain financial stability and introduce strategic financial planning; continue to work on the economic development of the Town; and maintain public safety as a high priority item.

Metcalf reassured his colleagues that they would have a say regarding the list and that it would be discussed and prioritized at the up-coming goal setting session that is scheduled for the morning of Saturday, January 28.

Metcalf called for the election of a Vice-Mayor.

It is a long-standing but unwritten

tradition in Moraga that the Mayor's seat goes to each Council member in sequence, since the position rotates every year. Seats on the Council come up for election every two years; two in one year, and three in the next election two years later. Since members serve for four years, one of the group of three does not get to be Vice Mayor and then Mayor. The unwritten rule has been that the one who gets the most votes in the public election will be the Vice Mayor. According to that tradition, it would have been Dave Trotter's turn. But when Metcalf put out the call, Mendonca nominated Howard Harpham.

"I nominated Howard because he tries to listen to everyone and does what he believes in his heart is in the best interest of the town," said Mendonca. Harpham was unanimously elected as the new Vice Mayor. Because his four-year term ends in 2012, he will only have the opportunity to become Mayor if he is re-elected.

Planning Director Looks at Reshaping Moraga

By Sophie Braccini

Moraga Planning Director Shawna Brekke-Read received support from the Town Council to apply for a Priority Development Area Designation for the Rheem neighborhood. The request represents the first step in the new Director's plan to make Moraga more business, pedestrian, bicyclist and student-friendly, and ultimately a more vibrant town.

Brekke-Read told the Council that future grant funding from regional agencies is expected to become increasingly competitive and largely limited to Priority Development Areas. The plan she wants to implement is the direct result of the report of the Economic Action Team that worked with the community to determine how to best develop the neighborhood around the Rheem Shopping Center. "We will need grant money to create a pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use area, consistent with Moraga's General Plan and what residents want," she said.

Brekke-Read also worked with Senior Planner Rich Chamberlain who, over his many years of service to the Town, has experienced the elements in the code that have nourished Moraga's business-unfriendly reputation.

"What businesses like best is predictability," believes Brekke-Read,

"at this time in commercial areas we have a list of permitted uses that are subjected to findings that are discretionary. This process is in fact unpredictable." She would rather have a list of fixed criteria and standards; businesses that would satisfied those would know they could quickly get a permit without having to go through Planning Commission hearings that can require unpredictable amounts of time and money; businesses that did not fit the Town's approved sets of criteria and standards would have to follow an application process that would involve a public review.

Brekke-Read also wants to review the Town's appeal process. "I have heard frustration over how appeals have gone historically," she says, "should Council and Commission members be able to appeal without paying a fee? Usually elected officials can call up an issue, and then the whole body votes on whether or not the item should be appealed."

The zoning ordinance is also on her list of action items. For example, the strip of land across from the Rheem Center along Moraga Rd, where 5A Rent-A-Space has its office, is zoned 'agriculture.' "Town Clerk Marty McInturf suggested that we work on our zoning ordinance one chunk at a time," said Brekke-Read, "this year we will start with the wine

growers (see side bar), and we will be looking at commercial zoning districts related to the permitted uses."

The Town's General Plan will be due for its ten-year review in 2012.

Revisiting Winemaking Regulations

"Moraga's winemaking activity started as small vineyards in backyards," explains Planning Director Shawna Brekke-Read when asked why regulations should be revisited in regards to local winemaking. "They stay under the agricultural use that is usually permitted. A few have become wineries (making their own wine under their own label) that have grown as a home occupation business, and that is also allowed. The issue going forward is whether they are going to remain small, more than a home occupation, or will they start to appear to be a business."

The municipal code indicates that a home occupation should remain an incidental and accessory use in residential land use districts under conditions that will ensure that the use is and remains compatible with the residential character of the neighborhood. Brekke-Read, who says that she has experience working with wholesale, distribution and winegrowing businesses, says she will meet with local winegrowers in early January.

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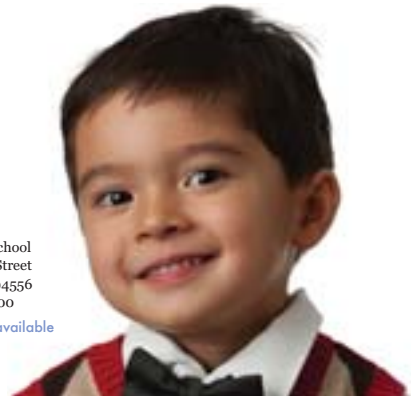
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