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Published January 4th, 2012

New Mayor Reflects and Sets Objectives

By Sophie Braccini

Moraga's new mayor, Mike Metcalf, is all about roads - maybe not too surprising for a retired engineer. This is Metcalf's second term wielding the gavel; he was first elected to the Council in 2004 and was the mayor five years ago, in 2007; coincidentally, that same year the Lamorinda Weekly first landed in, or near, your driveway.

Metcalf is known for his direct approach. His voting record suggests that he is a fiscally conservative member of the community, someone who sincerely loves his town, and is wary of anything labeled 'green.' He recalls his first year in the mayor's seat as he prepares for 2012.

"The local government's environment has changed since I was first Mayor," says Metcalf, "that Council had difficulty working well together- there were personality issues and unhealthy tension, which made it difficult to make things happen."

Metcalf remembers 2007 as a period of very low expectations. "There were some mistakes, like the speed bumps (on Camino Pablo). We tried new things to improve the Town's management such as TSAC (Traffic and Safety Advisory Committee) and the Finance Committee."

Metcalf's view is that five years ago the way the Town managed its finances was substandard, the manner special funds were handled was sloppy, and it was difficult to follow the budget, "the Finance Committee we established that year improved the visibility of finance, and the Committee is still in place," he says.

Five years ago, then-Town Manager Phil Vince projected that the Town would be bankrupt within 5 years. Moraga was determined to not let that happen.

"On the revenue side, sales taxes are up, the 'Shop Moraga First' campaign has had an impact, people are thinking of Moraga as an alternative- as a result we are starting to see improvement in the occupancy of the Rheem Center that is very encouraging," says Metcalf. "On the expense side, staff has found a lot of savings, positions have been cut, and management compensation is being set more thoughtfully."

The Mayor notes that the Town has significantly decreased its energy consumption and water and electricity usage.

"There is a systematic review of where money goes and things that do not make sense are eliminated," he says.

"We also revised our fee structure; we cannot give away services anymore."

Metcalf is proud that the Parks and Recreation Department now generates more money and he hails the creativity of the Hacienda Foundation for generating revenue with the Cinco de Mayo and Oktoberfest events. "Not only does it raise money for the Hacienda de Las Flores, but those are community building celebrations, such as our ever successful 4th of July," he notes.

Metcalf keeps going, he says, because he enjoys working with people that are professional. "You need a thick skin, to be very tolerant, and it is a lot of work," he adds, but doing things that he believes are good for the community makes it all worth it.

Metcalf firmly believes that the biggest thing that can be done for the community next year is to decide how to improve Moraga's infrastructure. "I have been involved with RECON (Revenue Enhancement Community Outreach to Neighborhoods), along with Howard (Harpham) since April of 2010. In 2012, the Town Council will have to decide whether or not to go to the ballot with a new funding mechanism to stop the worsening of our roads," says Metcalf, who knows that asking for more money is not a popular agenda. "I'd rather do the right thing and tell to the people, here is your choice: do you want to fix the roads or will you let them fail?"

He believes in telling the unvarnished truth, "We have a problem nationwide, we have so much infrastructure and never planned adequately to maintain it," Metcalf continues, "Our roads are deteriorating every day, like Fernwood Drive, that was beautiful and is starting to crack." Metcalf hopes that the Council will come up with a long-term plan that will incorporate the total cost of ownership of the infrastructure, will take charge of the back-log, and include long term maintenance.

Nonetheless, he does not want to give up on Moraga's philosophy of minimum government established by its founders "One of my guiding principles is to control the scope and expense of local government," he says, "but since Prop 13 Moraga is getting less than it gives to the State system. It's not that we are wasteful, it's that managing a Town is an expensive business."

Mayor Metcalf's Priorities for 2012

1: Secure revenue for the roads. Continue outreach to inform residents of the worsening conditions of local roads. Determine what infrastructure improvements the community feels are necessary.

2: Parks and sports field improvement. Finish redesign at Rancho Laguna Park. Look at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School sports fields with the School District. Work with the Hacienda Foundation on needed improvements. Support the Park Foundation's improvements at the Commons Park.

3: Town offices and community meeting room. Complete the project and make sure that staff gets out of the Hacienda if possible. Adopt video streaming of public meetings.

4: Finance and budgeting. Support new Finance Director in developing a strategic plan. Formalize the creation of an

infrastructure replacement funds, same with asset replacement fund.

5: Economic development planning. Define and fund a part time position for an economic development planner. Advance planning of the Rheem area. Review commercial zoning. Maintain engagement with Saint Mary's College as high priority.

6: Public safety. Push emergency planning effort along with Lafayette and Orinda, including having drills. Re-introduce the Slow Down Lamorinda campaign. Update the traffic calming guide. Improve bike and pedestrian safety around schools.

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