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## Moraga Still Getting Baby Food? Thoughts of a departing Town Engineer

By *Sophie Braccini*

Everybody agreed, at outgoing Public Works Director Jill Mercurio's farewell party, that when she leaves a part of the life of the party leaves with her. As Moraga Mayor Mike Metcalf put it, she brought an infectious high spiritedness that boosted the morale of Town staff. The Public Works Director and Town Engineer was described as being "one of the boys", respected for her competence and direct approach, and appreciated for her warmth and collaborative approach to management. As she leaves her office, she shared some thoughts about the past successes and the challenges Moraga faces.

Mercurio believes that Moraga's biggest impairment can be traced back to the passage of Prop. 13; the share that each municipality gets today from the property tax collected within its boundaries was set for perpetuity in 1978, when the town was only four years old. "Now the Town is an adult and it is still getting baby food," she says.

When the Town was incorporated in 1974, it was with the express mandate to keep the government and services to a minimum. The needs then were limited, and no one had anticipated that serious amounts of money had to be set aside to maintain the infrastructure. Today, residents pay the same amount of property tax as any other Contra Costa resident, but the difference is that less comes back to feed the General Fund of their town.

"Moraga operates with, on average, half the number of staff per 1000 residents than anywhere else," says Mercurio, "and the pay and benefits are in the lower tier. So it was the understanding of previous Town Managers that Moraga was a training ground; a place to advance one's career, but not to retire." Mercurio says that when then Town Manager Phil Vince hired her, he asked her to stay five years. She's been in charge for six and a half years and is now taking a position with the City of Vallejo as Assistant Public Works Director and City Engineer.

In addition to chronic under-staffing, the under-funding of the Town has had a dramatic impact on the maintenance backlog. "One of the reasons I was hired was my experience with building cases for getting grants for infrastructure," says Mercurio, "we've been quite successful over the past six years and were able to get a lot done." Residents will remember the repaving of Camino Pablo, part of Rheem Boulevard, and Moraga Road. The Director was also able to get funding for improvements around school grounds such as sidewalks and crossroads.

But there is no Federal or State funding for residential streets and that's why the roads have been degrading to the point of getting Moraga a regional rating of 'poor', at the bottom of the ladder, among Contra Costa municipalities. "We have a maintenance backlog of about \$25 million," says Mercurio, "that is what RECON (Revenue Enhancement Community Outreach to Neighborhoods Committee) has been working on: informing residents of the situation, and establishing a roadmap to get the repairs done, the best cost-effective way possible, and staged over a few years." Mercurio departs before the plan is complete, although she notes that it is almost finished.

"I am not especially concerned about the RECON work being interrupted with Jill's (Mercurio's) departure," says Metcalf. "Jill Keimach (the Town Manager) has arranged for the on-call services of the engineering manager in El Cerrito. Jerry Bradshaw will be joining the RECON team in the same capacity vacated by Jill Mercurio. Jerry brings experience as the engineer who formulated the El Cerrito street rehabilitation program." Metcalf points out that several years ago El Cerrito's neighborhood streets were in similar condition to Moraga's neighborhood streets today and credits Bradshaw with fashioning a pavement rehabilitation program which, once voters passed the bond measure that funded it, was executed. Now El Cerrito's neighborhood streets are mostly in "good" condition. "That's exactly the outcome we're shooting for in Moraga," says the Mayor, "I'm confident Jerry (Bradshaw) can give us a lot of help. We are fortunate that Contra Costa cities are always willing to help one another out."

Everyone was very emotional at Mercurio's farewell party on January 19, including Staff Engineer John Sherbert who said that he will miss her problem solving, mentoring, and leadership skills. In Vallejo she will deal with similar issues: infrastructure to be maintained and budget restrictions. At least she will have some money to play with; the city recently very narrowly approved a 1% sales tax to be charged on purchases of goods and services made within the city limits, to finance local services including infrastructure maintenance.

### Property Tax Allocations

Of the total property tax residents pay, only a fraction goes to municipalities. That percentage was set in stone by Prop. 13. Those percentages for Lamorinda and a couple of nearby communities are:

Moraga 5.3%  
Lafayette 6.8%  
Orinda 7.4%  
Concord 10.4%  
Pittsburg 15.8%

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