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## Bruce Whitley, Planning Commissioner Extraordinaire, Steps Down

By Sophie Braccini



Bruce Whitney Photo Sophie Braccini

Extraordinaire: out of the ordinary; a good adjective for Bruce Whitley, a Moraga Planning Commissioner who served for 8 years - the maximum term of 6 years plus two additional years by decision of the Town Council. The reason for the exception is that by all accounts, Whitley brought to the Commission a dispassionate and analytical view point that was very helpful in the decision-making process. His motivation for serving so long as a volunteer on a body that requires quite a bit of work was his desire to be part of and involved in the community he's lived in for 14 years. He attended his last Planning Commission meeting as a Commissioner on February 22.

"Most people have the desire to be involved in the community. Different people do it in different ways; some give time to the PTA, others to sports groups," says Whitley, "I have a particular skill set, I am a CPA and an attorney, I work with papers and documents; so I looked for something that would use that skill set and be involved with the community-I thought that the Planning Commission would be a good way to go."

The Planning Commission is a body of seven residents, appointed by the Town Council, who meet twice a month to review, evaluate and decide matters prepared by the Planning Director. Their decisions can be appealed to the Town Council. Over the past eight years, Whitley's been involved into all the important planning decisions in town, such as the final approval of the Palos Colorados Development, the Rancho Laguna Development, the Moraga

Center Specific Plan, the Hetfield development, and, on the business side, Orchard Supply and Dollar Tree, to name a few.

Whitley believes, however, that making a difference means more than deciding the big ticket issues. "Making a real difference has to do with the decisions that affect individual property and that have a great meaning to people on a personal basis," he says, "the town has restriction on variances; quite often, at least once a month, a homeowner asks for a variance. People want to expand a kitchen or design a house that slightly breaches the strict guidelines of our code. Should the variance be allowed, should it not be allowed, how could we change the project to both honor the desire of the town to restrict certain types of development and assist homeowners to achieve their dreams? That's quite dramatic; it has extreme impact on people's lives. It does make a difference nobody hears about."

In both small and large projects emotions can run high and that's when Whitley's way of addressing issues from a logical perspective based on an analysis of the Town's code was most valued.

"I was on the Planning Commission when he came on eight years ago," says Moraga Mayor Mike Metcalf, "Bruce quickly became a priceless Commissioner. He thinks very clearly, never rushes to talk just for the sake of it, and he is very thoughtful." Metcalf explains that it was because Whitley was such an anchor for the Commission that he was asked to serve a 4th term.

Lori Salamack, who was Moraga's Planning Director during most of Whitley's tenure, was quickly on the phone from the East Coast to talk about him, because she says there are never enough good things said about him. "You could always count on Bruce (Whitley) to come prepared to the meeting and have done a thorough analysis of the documents," said Salamack from her FEMA office where she is contributing to the Hurricane Irene recovery effort after Hurricane Irene, "yet, he would not come with foregone conclusions. He would always wait for public comment before making up his mind." She added that he was a tremendous public servant and that if the Council decided to prolong his tenure on the Commission it was because his expertise was absolutely essential.

During the February 22 meeting of the Planning Commission, Whitley was part of the discussion brought forth by Shawna Brekke-Read, the new Planning Director, regarding amending the way businesses can get permits. At first, Whitley did not think it was a good idea to change a process where people can say no when they don't like a business, "my ears are still ringing from the discussions about Orchard Supply and Dollar Tree," he said. But as the discussion proceeded his point of view evolved, "The Chamber has correctly pointed out that opening a business in town is difficult and it is a legitimate complaint," he said, "the solution could be allowing certain types of businesses that the people have said they wanted to see in town to get a permit 'over-the-counter', while others would still need findings."

The Council and the Planning Commission will discuss the details of these new rules. It's likely that Whitley, no longer in his Commission seat, will still be paying attention.

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