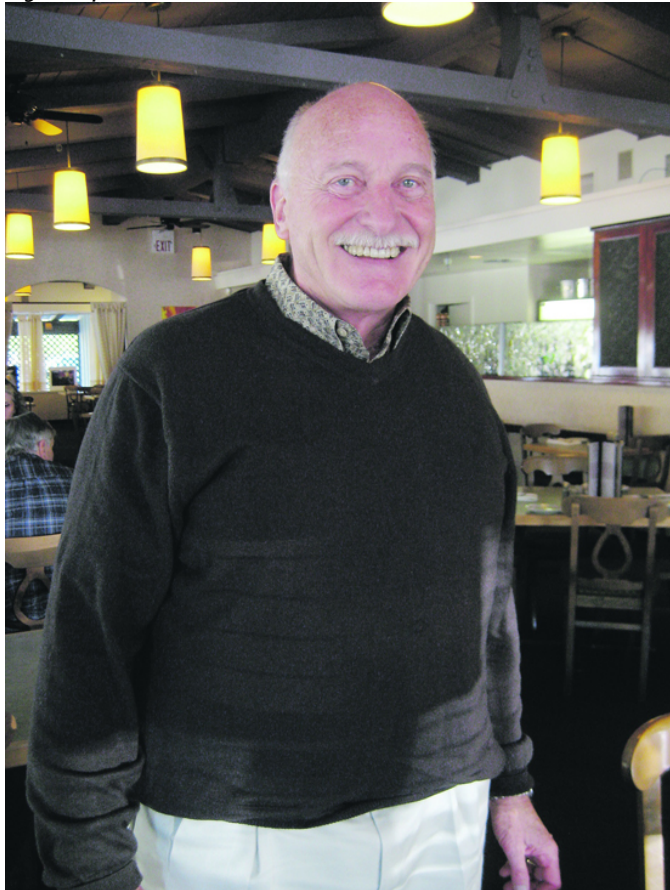


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Moraga's Swing Vote, Vice Mayor Howard Harpham

By Sophie Braccini



Howard Harpham Photo Sophie Braccini

When three of the members of the Moraga Council were elected, almost four years ago, one of the three was designated to never get the opportunity to sit in the Mayor's chair. According to the town's unwritten tradition, that role fell to the candidate who was elected by the fewest votes—Howard Harpham, who is now the vice mayor.

Four years ago the retired Public Defender for the Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office thought it unlikely that he would serve more than one term on the Council, but he now admits a willingness to run again next November. Harpham has been the swing vote on a few decisions, notably the recent issues regarding Rancho Laguna Park. Harpham's vision for Moraga is of a college town, which differs from the unsubstantiated semi-rural character that many want to preserve.

"I am not one to pull the minutes because I've been slightly misquoted, or to talk just for the sake of it," says Harpham. "I talk when I really have a point to make or an argument to develop." Harpham speaks less than his council colleagues, but when he does speak, people listen, especially since his position is not always the one that is expected.

"When I worked for the D.A.'s Office," recalls the former attorney, "there were times when someone would get much better treatment than they should have, just because he or she was able to reach out to the judge. Making due allowances, the same thing can happen during a council meeting when residents come up with something reasonable, that's conveyed with some real emotion." However, any attempt to strong-arm the Council is sure to meet with his opposition.

Regarding Rancho Laguna Park, Harpham seems to

have changed his position more than once, from being willing to give off-leash dogs some grassy areas, to favoring the option without grass, to again supporting a dog area with grass. "It is not like there was a great solution and a bad one," says Harpham. "I thought that the option without grass was a better one for the town as a whole, and I'm sure that if the dog owners had given it a try, if grass had been sewn (as the plan proposed), the solution would have worked. But I could also live with the second option (the so-called Mickey Mouse plan).

Harpham indicates that this last change was not the result of demonstrations and threats by dog owners, but that the law suit that was filed against the Town was costing thousands of dollars; a luxury the Town cannot afford, even to make a point. "I do not make my decisions based on the number of people who show up at a meeting," he says, "but on what I think is in the best long term interest of the town."

For Harpham, the first element that needs to be in place for the long term preservation of Moraga is its finances. "Our first duty is to match our obligations to our resources," he says. Maintaining the infrastructure is a must for the vice mayor who also manages a homeowners' association that annually sets aside the funds for its roads. "We need to bite the bullet," he says, referring to the Town's plan to put a road-related tax measure on the November ballot.

"Our second duty is to select the best people to manage the Town, and I think that our Town Manager, Jill Keimach, is head and shoulders above any previous manager we've had," he says.

The third duty is to foster an ethos for the town. "My vision for Moraga is one of a college town," he says. "Leiden (in the Netherlands, half way between Amsterdam and The Hague) is the model I have in mind—with cafes where professors, students and residents hang out, where campus buildings are intertwined with the non-university homes. We would need a shuttle between Saint Mary's and the town, and we would need new schools in the College, such as a Nursing School, to be integrated with the town."

Harpham has started to invite college professors to speak at Kiwanis meetings, noting that, "If there were more such events right here in town, it would make Moraga much more fun!"

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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