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Moraga Town Council's Cohesiveness Shaken Town staff charged with finding out what works in Lafayette

By Sophie Braccini

For over 25 years the titles Mayor and Vice Mayor rotated among elected members of the Moraga Town Council according to who won the highest number of votes in the general election, and one year's vice mayor usually became the next year's mayor. Since there are five council members each serving four-year terms, and the mayor and vice mayor seats are held for one year, there was always one council member who never got a turn-according to tradition, the loser of this game of musical chairs was always the one who residents sent to the council on the fewest votes.

Occasionally this tradition has been challenged. For example, a few years ago now-mayor Mike Metcalf attempted to pull the chairs out from under both Lynda Deschambault and Ken Chew. He did not succeed because the rest of that particular Council was determined not to break the unwritten rule.

But tradition was cast aside last December when Karen Mendonca proposed that Howard Harpham become vice mayor-despite an expectation that the seat would go to Dave Trotter, who got more votes than Harpham-and no one opposed. In another twist, Harpham's term in office ends this December, although he said during a recent interview that he plans to run for a second term.

This dramatic end to a system that had been perfectly predictable for so many years took some Moraga residents by surprise and, during a public comment period, Ellen Beans called for the issue to be put on the Town Council's agenda for discussion.

On April 11 the Council considered the question of how Moraga's mayor and vice mayor should be chosen. Mendonca, Metcalf and Chew agreed that because the current tradition was not set in writing there was no reason to be bound by it, and having flexibility in the choice of who would lead was more important. "If the Council thinks that a particular leader would be best at the time, that's when the Council would want to maximize its flexibility," said Mendonca, recalling a conversation she had with a former Town Manager who explained the rules to her.

Trotter preferred a system that he said has kept politics, lobbying, and personal disputes out of the process, and that has served the town well; but he received no support from his colleagues.

With the Council's agreement, Metcalf concluded the discussion by asking staff to look into the City of Lafayette's process, by which the mayor's seat rotates among all Council members regardless of the number of popular votes received, and bring a proposal back to the Council at an unspecified future date since other, more pressing, issues are presently on the Council's plate.

What will Moraga's staff find in Lafayette?

Like Moraga, Lafayette does not have a formal written procedure for selecting its mayor and vice mayor. According to the Lafayette City Council members themselves, it's a loosely-defined process that works well because the members are respectful, listen more than they talk, and even if they sometimes disagree with one another, they never carry a grudge.

"We used to rotate the mayor's seat the same way Moraga did," explained Lafayette City Council Member Don Tatzin who, with 27 years of service, is the Council veteran. "We always knew what the policy was and followed it. We never took anyone out of order or skipped anybody. My experience has been that everybody always does the best they can when it is their year to be the mayor."

But Tatzin felt it was a bit unfair that this system could prevent the lowest vote-getter from ever becoming mayor and, when Brandt Andersson was elected to the Council, Tatzin supported Andersson's proposal under which everyone gets a turn - and the Council agreed.

"We still do not have anything in writing," said Andersson, who has now been on the Council for seven years. "I discussed it with the city manager and the mayor at the time, and we decided on a system that's a combination of who's been on the Council the longest and not had a turn the longest. That person gets to be the next in line." What makes this system work in Lafayette is that council members all agree on the concept. "We have an understanding that this is a collegial decision," added Andersson. "We've had many years of very successful city government and we continue to serve because everybody works together to make life better here. There are not a lot of conflicts, otherwise we would want to get out of it," he concluded.

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