

Spirit Van Program Seeks Friends with Funds in Moraga

Program coordinator asks Moraga Town Council for additional support

By Sophie Braccini

Mary Bruns gave a compelling presentation when she came to ask the Moraga Town Council for additional funds for the Lamorinda Spirit Van program on May 23. As she does every year Bruns, the coordinator of the program that take seniors to appointments and to run errands, came to the Council meeting to report on how the \$9,000 the Town contributed last year was spent, and to ask for \$12,500 this year due to the increasing costs of running the program.

Bruns was accompanied by one of the van's volunteer drivers and two Moraga passengers who testified to its usefulness. However, the Council refused to increase the Town's donation amount; instead, it encouraged Bruns to seek other sources of funding.

"When I lost my driver's license I stopped going out and became depressed," Yoshi Weber, a frail, senior Moraga resident told the Council. "Then my daughter told me about the Lamorinda Spirit Van and now I am going back to my art class." Weber was followed at the podium by Heather Bransbury, a wheelchair-bound Moragan who explained that

the Spirit Van was her only way to get to her appointments. "As the population gets older, this service will become even more valuable," she said.

During her presentation Bruns projected that by 2020, 25 percent of Moraga's population will be senior citizens.

The Spirit Van is funded by the three communities, Moraga, Orinda and Lafayette, and by the riders who pay \$5 per trip. Lafayette makes the largest contribution and Orinda the smallest. Bruns indicated that in 2011 the Spirit Van made 450 trips for Moraga residents. She also said that the program is trying to purchase a second vehicle, a mini-van, and that it would welcome more business from Moragans. She asked the Town to increase its contribution, mostly to cover mounting operating costs, a consequence of higher gas prices.

"If you look at what towns contribute per ride, Moraga pays the most," said Mayor Mike Metcalf as he looked at the facts provided by Bruns. "You need to make this presentation in Orinda."

No Council member was willing to add \$3,500 per year for the pro-

gram. Bruns was asked if she had approached local service groups such as Kiwanis and Rotary—she replied that she had applied to them but received no support.

Three members of the board of directors of the non-profit Lamorinda Dogs who came to the meeting hoping to encourage the Council to reconsider its decision regarding plans for an off-leash dog area at Rancho Laguna Park, to no avail, were impressed by the presentation and decided to make a \$500 donation.

"Jeanne Moreau, Blair Newell and I were touched as you discussed your mission," said Lamorinda Dogs' Bill Carman later. "We requested unanimous approval from our directors to donate the sum of \$500 to help you keep the people who built our community mobile." He also asked her if the Spirit Van could help transport seniors to the group's farewell barbecue party at Rancho Laguna Park on June 2.

For more information about the Lamorinda Spirit Van Program contact Mary Bruns at mbruns@ci.lafayette.ca.us or (925) 283-3534.

Town Loses Another Staffer

Public Works' John Sherbert retires

By Sophie Braccini

John Sherbert's last day as Staff Engineer in the Moraga Public Works Department was May 25. Sherbert retired after only five years in public service because his life has led him along many different paths. As he prepared to depart, he shared memories of achievement, of great camaraderie, of hard work, and a few concerns about the Town of Moraga.

He also proposed a somewhat unorthodox idea for how to reduce costs and overhead: consolidate all or part of the staff in Lamorinda.

Sherbert is the third person to leave Moraga's Public Works Department this year. Department head Jill Mercurio accepted a new job four months ago, and has not yet been replaced; inspector Dana Blatner left unexpectedly a few weeks ago.

"We are in the process of recruiting a replacement for Jill Mercurio," said Town Manager Jill Keimach. She added that she was expecting someone to start in that position this summer. In the interim, the Town is contracting with Contra Costa County for grading inspection (part of Blatner's job), Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram is picking up Public Works, and Rob Kalkbrenner has a contract as interim Town Engineer—he works two days a week.

Sherbert is witness to the conse-

quences of having a very small staff, especially in view of mounting federal and state requirements. "We are so thin on staff that if someone leaves, it is hard to find anybody to pick up the slack," he said. He also thinks that a very small staff has to deal with so many aspects of the job that it can be at the expense of becoming very competent in any one area.

His solution would be to consolidate some, if not all, of the three Lamorinda municipal administrations. "There is potential for economy of scale," he said, "and it would increase local expertise because people would have the opportunity to specialize more." He added that the downside could be the loss of some local control. "But the costs are such that I would trade off local control for reducing costs," he said. As examples, he cited the Acalanes Union High School District that manages four high schools, and the Moraga Orinda Fire District. "There are issues and discussions, but at least we do not have to pay for two Fire Chiefs or three Superintendents," he concluded.

None of the local governments have publicly discussed the creation of a "Lamorinda staff," but at the last Tri-City meeting on February 15, the three Councils discussed working together to put joint transportation bids out to increase their bargaining power.

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