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## Planning Commission Looks at Signs

*Subcommittee established to study commercial sign regulation*

*By Sophie Braccini*

Some seven years ago, then Planning Director Lori Salamack held a series of workshops to get the business community's feedback on Moraga's sign ordinance and any amendments that might be needed. It became clear, after a few months of public discussion, that a regulation stipulating that a sign ordinance must be content-neutral was a hurdle that could not be overcome and the amendment process was dropped.

Recently some Moraga businesses took it upon themselves to freshen up the perspective on what's allowed by displaying non-compliant signs. Residents complained and Town staff asked for the removal of the signs.

In order to move the ball forward two local business owners, Grant Stubblefield, of Neighborhood Computers, and Brad Noggle, of 5-A-Rent-A-Space, proposed some changes to the Planning Commission, which decided August 6 to form a subcommittee to study possible amendments to certain elements of the sign ordinance pertaining to business signs.

Moraga Planning Director Shawna Brekke-Read indicated that her department received six to eight complaints from residents last month after businesses put up very visible, temporary signs, mostly along Moraga Road, which is designated a scenic corridor. When asked to remove the signs, business owners complained that the Town's ordinance makes it very costly to make a compliant sign and that it is hard to attract customers without signage. Noggle and Stubblefield took the initiative to meet with staff and start drafting an amendment that would allow the display of temporary signs during business hours.

"Businesses would pay a \$500 annual fee for signs that could be up eight hours per day," proposed Stubblefield. "An administrative process would allow firms to place temporary signs on private properties along the scenic corridor. Staff would have to approve the signs that would not be limited in height to 16 feet." He added that this was an exploratory effort to find a solution.

Resident Dale Walwark was the voice of caution during the meeting. "It is important to determine what we want the town to look like," he said. "We have an overall goal for aesthetics. We don't want to look like Manteca. We have to be careful and conservative." With the election season approaching, Walwark also suggested that the Town's control of political signs be tightened.

Speaking for the Chamber of Commerce, Kathe Nelson said she is in favor of changing the sign ordinance to tastefully support businesses and keep them in Moraga.

Resident Carolyn Wood supported the Stubblefield-Noggle proposal, "We make them (businesses) miserable over signs," she said. "We should be less restrictive and more supportive of businesses."

Planning Commissioners expressed concern about the enforceability of a new ordinance, but overall supported the idea of an amendment for business signage. "We want to do something for the businesses and Grant's (Stubblefield) proposal is a good start, but more work is needed," said Commissioner Dick Socolich, who chaired the meeting that night and proposed the creation of a subcommittee to study the issue.

"I was encouraged by the Commissioners' decision to create a subcommittee to help expedite the process,"

Stubblefield said after the meeting. "Despite lots of discussion regarding controversial signs relating to real estate, events, and various others, they were able to come to the conclusion that our proposal is the first of many amendments that will need to be made to the current sign ordinance. I agreed with the commission's statement that the only way to make progress on the ordinance is if we take on each issue separately and business signs are a good place to start."

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