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Town Council Considers Joaquin Moraga Adobe

By *Sophie Braccini*

Will the home of the founding father of Moraga, which is actually in Orinda, be preserved as a historic landmark or will it become a private clubhouse for a 13-home subdivision? When asked that question by the Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe (FJMA), the Moraga Town Council unanimously agreed to do what they could to help preserve the historic site. But the Town arrives very late in a game that started three and a half years ago and apparently ended with the approval of the subdivision of the 20.33-acre Adobe property by the Orinda Planning Commission until the FJMA appealed that decision.

There are many obstacles in the way of FJMA's wish to turn the Adobe into an accessible historical site: the home of the Moraga family is on private property in Orinda zoned for development; the plan approved by the Orinda Planning Commission will turn the Adobe into a private clubhouse and it considered that plan to be adequate preservation. Even if the City of Orinda agreed that the building deserves a more historically correct fate, what sort of financial compensation could be offered to the site's current owner?

"I wish the property would have been on the other side of the border (in Moraga)," said Kent Long, President of the FJMA during the heartfelt plea he made to the Town Council October 24. According to FJMA, the Adobe is the oldest historic building in Contra Costa County - it was built by Joaquin Moraga after he and his cousin, Juan Bernal, received a land grant from the Mexican government that included what is now most of Lamorinda and Canyon. "The existing building comprises two rooms that are the original adobe rooms built by the Moragas in 1841 and where the family settled," said Long.

According to Long, the development project that creates 13 lots for single-family residences raises two main issues. First, it transforms the Adobe into a private clubhouse, which means that the two original rooms will not be preserved as a historic site, and the public (mostly school groups) will not have access to it. Second, the view from the Adobe that sweeps the entire Lamorinda area and that was the reason the Moragas chose that specific place, will be lost, with the building of new homes and planting of trees.

Long's presentation to the Council fell on sympathetic ears. "If you give up your past, you give up your identity," said Vice Mayor Howard Harpham. "When you lose history, it's gone," agreed Mayor Mike Metcalf. But council members concurred that finding a practical solution would not be easy. Who would own the Adobe? Who would operate it if it became a public museum? Where is the money to finance such a project?

Harpham was not afraid to say that Eminent Domain could be the course of action. "The thing that should be done is just take the bull by the horns and if you want to preserve your past and identity, and your children's education, then go ahead and do it." The Council recommended that FJMA continue to approach private foundations that could help fund the establishment of a public, restored facility.

"There is an opening here for the governments of Moraga and Orinda to do something. My concern is that this may not be the highest priority of the Orinda City Council," said Metcalf. A subcommittee composed of the mayor and Council Member Dave Trotter was appointed to represent the Town on this issue.

Council Member Karen Mendonca cautioned that the approach had to be respectful of Orinda since the property is located within its borders. Town Manager Jill Keimach recommended that the subcommittee work on a specific plan for this project. The Council will discuss the plan at its November 14 meeting, a few days before the City of Orinda will hold a hearing on the issue. (Read a related article on page A6.)

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[back](#)

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