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Moraga's Plan for the Adobe Takes Shape

By Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Town Council has a plan to save the Joaquin Moraga Adobe from becoming a private club house for 13 homeowners, wanting it preserved as a historical treasure that is open to the public for educational purposes. Trouble is, the Adobe is in Orinda—so last week the Town Council sent a letter to the City of Orinda.

The Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe (FJMA) recently appealed the Orinda Planning Commission's approval of the development of the Adobe property; the appeal will be heard by the Orinda City Council in January.

Introducing the agenda item at the council's Nov. 14 meeting, Town Manager Jill Keimach said that Moraga was respectful of Orinda's process and that the letter was an effort to start a discussion while proposing very specific strategies aimed at preserving the Adobe as a historical site. The staff report reads in part, "The first goal is to provide public access to the Adobe structure in order to educate and showcase the Adobe structure as it was initially built in 1841, in conformance with the Historical/Cultural Resources Study by the Architectural Resources Group." The second goal is to preserve the view from the Adobe's porch.

The council believes the best solution is for FJMA to purchase both the Adobe and Lot 12, a piece of land where the developer plans to build a house that would, according to FJMA, annihilate the panoramic view from the Adobe's porch—the view that drew Joaquin Moraga and his family to that location in the first place. FJMA would restore and maintain the building as a museum, with help from the Moraga Historical Society.

FJMA President Kent Long expressed hope that with the weight of the town thrown into the battle, albeit "at the 11th hour," the dynamic will change. The property owner and developer, J&J Ranch, requested a delay before the appeal of the project is heard by Orinda's council and Long views this as a positive sign; he anticipates new discussions with J&J Ranch will take place before the hearing.

If negotiations with the developer are successful, FJMA's challenge would be to find enough money to purchase the property. "Now that we have a plan, we can approach foundations and private companies who might be willing to participate in a non-profit venture," said Long.

Michael Olson of J&J Ranch shared a few thoughts the day after the meeting. "The Town of Moraga reached out to us and gave us a heads up about the letter to the City of Orinda," he said. Although he would not comment on the proposal itself, he indicated that one of the reasons he had to ask to postpone the Orinda hearing was to resume discussions with FJMA. "We have always been open to talking with them and explore options that would be mutually beneficial," he said, "but we also needed to move on with the project."

"The developer is interested in doing the right thing," said Orinda Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu, who added he is hopeful that a compromise would be found.

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