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Why Doesn't Anyone Want to Work Here?

Town of Moraga plagued by staff shortage

By Sophie Braccini

Moraga's Planning Department is reduced to the director and one assistant, the Town Engineer has no staff, and 15 percent of the Police Department is departing. Town staff is leaner than ever and service levels are being impacted. Is it just a series of unpleasant coincidences or an endemic problem? What are the consequences for those who stay and for residents? Is it time to lay to rest the old discourse on Moraga's minimum government?

Among the Town Council's top three goals for the year is a review of the General Plan's land use regulation. At the Jan. 23 Town Council meeting, Council Member Phil Arth asked that this be postponed for six months on the grounds that the planning director does not have the staff to take on another project of this magnitude. Vice Mayor Ken Chew, who offered the same reason for opposing this goal in January, and Council Member Mike Metcalf, who was not a great supporter of revising the plan, concurred.

"There are consequences to not having staff available," said Planning Director Shawna Brekke-Read during a discussion on the topic of staff vacancies.

Last year, when Senior Planner Rich Chamberlain retired, the workload was not excessive and it was decided to save money by not replacing him. Then the assistant planner left unexpectedly for family reasons. Brekke-Read recruited a replacement, but she didn't last more than a few weeks. "The workload and long night meetings were too much for her," Brekke-Read said. "We had told her, but experiencing it was a different thing." For a while a planner laid off by Orinda worked in Moraga, but she received an offer from another agency that she found more attractive.

The consequence for the town is that some projects are not addressed and service to residents takes longer. A permit that could be obtained in one day will take three, a permitted use for a new business can take up to two months, and long-term planning is on hold-this includes issues such as the sign ordinance, winery regulation, and rezoning the Moraga Country Club. "And there are lost opportunities, such as a Caltrans grant that's open for application, but we have no time to apply," Brekke-Read lamented.

"The difficulty comes from the salaries and benefits we can offer, as well as the long hours," said Town Manager Jill Keimach. "All the department heads took salary cuts when they came to work for Moraga."

At January's town goal-setting session Frank Melon, general manager of Moraga Country Club, offered his advice to the council. "I know how difficult it is to recruit staff in Moraga," he said. "In order to retain people I need to be the employer of choice. You need to look at your compensation level to keep them."

Mayor Dave Trotter does not believe that salaries and benefits can be raised. "We live in a time of budget constraints," he said. "In the '70s the town was formed with a philosophy of minimum government and as a result of this choice-and of Prop. 13 that froze the percentage of property taxes cities get-we are under-funded compared to most other municipalities." According to Trotter, Moraga has no choice but to stay a minimal government town, even if many residents want more than minimum services.

There are dedicated employees who stick with Moraga. "Bob Priebe (Chief of Police) has been here for a very long time; Lori Salamack (Brekke-Read's predecessor) stayed for more than 10 years, and many others," Trotter said. He is aware that a lot is asked of staff due to their small number. "As a council, have to adjust our expectations and make sure that we retain our valued staff," he added.

Keimach and Brekke-Read are confident that they will be able to recruit and retain qualified employees to fill the vacancies. "There are many positive aspects to working in Moraga," Brekke-Read said. "We form a real team, the communication is excellent and the town offers a very large variety of tasks and growth opportunity." Keimach added that she believes that the community understands that staff works very hard and is appreciative.

The council prioritized Keimach's need for staff recruitment, with the constraint of finding ways other than financial to retain her employees. "We will be negotiating employee agreements this year," she said. "I will ask our creative staff what things could make their lives easier and appeal to them." She cited an El Cerrito policy that allows people to work 9-hour days and have every other Friday off. "That would allow us to keep up with our family lives," she noted.

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[back](#)

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