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A Promise Kept: Town Staff Moves Out of Hacienda

By Sophie Braccini



Yuliya Elbo (standing) and Beth Cowley were among the last staff members to leave the Hacienda de las Flores for 329 Rheem. Photos Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Town Council and staff made a promise to residents in 2009 - all town departments except Parks and Recreation would vacate the Hacienda de las Flores within a few years so it could be returned to its intended usage as a recreation/community center. It took longer than predicted, but on Feb. 1 the last staff member left the historical building for the now fully re-organized Town Hall at 329 Rheem. It was done "Moraga-style," with a budget that shrunk from an initial \$1.4 million to \$200,000- a few improvements got dropped along the way.

"We've done it on a dime, and it looks pretty good," commented Town Clerk Marty McInturf. The Planning Department is on the ground floor to the left as you enter the building and the police are still to the right. Taking the stairs, or riding up in the new ADA-compliant elevator, to the second floor, residents will find Public Works to the right of the landing, and to the left the Town Clerk, a part-time assistant, the Town Manager and the Administrative Services Department. Only the three-person strong Parks and Recreation Department remains at the Hacienda.

"When I took my job at the end of 2010 I was made aware of the emotional charge for many residents regarding the issue of retrofitting 329 Rheem and moving staff out of the Hacienda," remembers Town Manager Jill Keimach. "The

goal-setting session of 2011 set the time of the move to the end of 2011." Keimach came back with a plan and was asked to add a Council Chamber to the building. "My original plan's cost was around \$1.4 million," she said. "The council rejected the plan and we started to scale back."

The Council Chamber was taken out of the picture - a modest meeting room will open at 331 Rheem instead - parking improvements were canceled, and solar panels removed from the plan. The biggest cost element that got slashed was a seismic retrofit. "The hill behind the building is unstable anyway," said Keimach. "It would not make sense to spend millions retrofitting a building under these circumstances."

"Once we took the seismic retrofit out of the picture we started re-thinking the inside layout to minimize work," said Keimach.

"I like it a lot," said Administrative Services Technician Beth Cowley a few days after the move. Accountant Yuliya Elbo added that she thought she would miss the Hacienda but has not, yet. "It's nice to have almost everybody in one place," said Keimach. "The decision of the council to have it done for less was the right one. We do what we can with what we have, and we're not competing with other cities with our buildings."



Kim Burrowes

What Happens Next?

The second and third floor of the Hacienda de las Flores are now empty of people, although not of archives and documents of all sorts. "The Hacienda was purchased in 1973 to become a park and community center," recalled George Fisher of the Moraga Movers. "Our group considers the Hacienda as their home, and we urge the council to return it to its original designation."

Fisher is delighted that staff left, and he will participate in a celebration organized by Ellen Beans and the Moraga Citizens Network to thank staff on Valentine's Day.

The Hacienda Foundation was created to enhance, promote and preserve the building and grounds. "We are happy about this move," said foundation president Steve Woehleke. "This gives us the opportunity to pursue a strategic plan for the Hacienda."

But what to do with all the space that is not ADA compliant? Nobody seems to have a plan right now for what can be done upstairs, even once an elevator is installed. The first floor is far from being saturated with recreation activities, and the upstairs used to be the living quarters of the Rheem family; it has plenty of charm and a great view, but century-old amenities.

"We could turn it into bridal suites," speculated Kim Burrowes of the Parks and Recreation Department. "People who rent the place for weddings ask about living quarters, and there is nothing in Moraga." The Hacienda Foundation plans to present its vision to the town at the end of 2013 or early in 2014. S.Braccini

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