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## **New Commercial Zoning Coming to Rheem**

*By Sophie Braccini*

When Moraga's 'planning boat' was rocked by the November, 2010 decision to allow Dollar Tree at the Rheem Center, the town looked to streamline and tailor the commercial approval process to meet the needs of the community. Two years in the making, after community input sessions and much work by the ad-hoc Economic Development Action Committee, a new commercial zoning plan for the Rheem area enters its final phase as it comes before the Moraga Planning Commission for review.

At a Feb. 20 meeting, planning commissioners reviewed the first draft proposed by staff to modify the commercial zoning of the Rheem area.

"What we need is to have a list of the businesses that we want to see in town and make it extremely easy for these to get a permit over the counter; while requiring those that need to be more controlled to go through a conditional-use permit process," said Commissioner Jim Obsitnik.

Planning Director Shawna Brekke-Read explained the reasons for changing the municipal code for business approval. Businesses considered highly desirable by the community cannot, at this time, be approved administratively by staff; they usually have to go through a planning commission hearing that takes time and adds complexity. The new code would allow a permitted-use business to bypass that process-businesses such as retail, services, art venues and restaurants.

The commissioners discussed what elements might force a proposed new business to go through the more lengthy process. Likely to be included in this category are chain stores-either retail or restaurant-businesses occupying more than 2,000 square feet, and businesses that offer a product similar to an existing business located less than 1,000 feet away. "Studies show that what makes a shopping area vibrant is a mix of small, local and large businesses," Brekke-Read explained, "and the community also indicated it favors locally-owned businesses."

David Bruzzone, whose family owns the Moraga Center, expressed his concern over having different rules applied to the two shopping centers, thus favoring one over the other.

No final decision was made at the February meeting. At the next session of the planning commission, a new group of commissioners will be sworn in and will take up the review of the proposed zoning changes.

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