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Planning Commission Favors Free Enterprise Approach for Rheem Zoning

By Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Planning Commission convened March 18 to start making decisions about potential new zoning for the Rheem Center area, with the ultimate goal of making it easier for desirable businesses to set up shop. Its first decisions indicate that a majority of commissioners do not want the town to interfere with the free market.

According to commercial real estate broker Dave Schnayer, this discussion has been ongoing for 15 years and has included many meetings, town-funded studies and community outreach.

Despite the fact that several of the planning commissioners are newly appointed, only a handful of residents came to share their thoughts with the commission; although many citizens participated in previous public meetings regarding the commercial zoning and revitalization of the Rheem area.

Planning Director Shawna Brekke-Read had prepared questions for the commissioners to answer so she could draft an ordinance that she will bring back for the commission's review.

The ordinance will spell out what commercial uses should be approved over-the-counter (permitted use) in order to provide a fluid and business-friendly process to prospective owners, and what types of uses would continue to need to go through a formal review process (conditional use), a longer and costly system that gives more control to the town but is a source of uncertainty for business owners.

"What is your position on 'formula' businesses?" asked Brekke-Read. "Should they go through a review process in order to favor locally-owned ventures?" Most commissioners declared their support for free enterprise and refused to give preferred treatment to locally-owned businesses, although commissioners Tom Marnane and Jim Kline noted that the lack of charm of the current commercial scene could be attributed to chain or formula-based businesses.

The commissioners were also not inclined to set a limit on the concentration of similar businesses in close proximity. They agreed that restaurants should be a permitted use, that outdoor sitting should be encouraged, and that outdoor display of merchandise was fine.

The commission decided that size could trigger a conditional use process, but wondered if the 2,000-square-foot limit proposed by the Economic Development and Action Committee was too constraining. It agreed that banks and other financial services should be permitted on the second floor of the center, but be conditional on the ground floor. The only type of business the commission agreed to prohibit was manufacturing.

The discussion will continue when the planning director presents a draft zoning ordinance to the commission.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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