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Planning the Future of Commons Park Proves Complicated

By Celia Magidson

The Moraga Parks and Recreation Commission met in mid-July to discuss the future of Moraga Commons Park. They started with the analysis of a survey conducted at the request of Jay Ingram, parks and recreation director. Commissioners were disappointed that the survey results suggested residents are generally happy with their beloved park.

Early this year Ingram started work on a master plan for the Commons. Seeking ways to encourage greater use of the park by the community, he reached out to Chris Chamberlain, a professor in the department of hospitality, recreation and tourism at Cal State East Bay. Chamberlain's students created a survey that was supposed to provide the town with added insight to Moraga's recreational needs and desires for the park's future.

Ingram emailed the survey to 3,000 residents and received a total of 564 responses, of which more than 50 percent were from residents with kids at home. Roughly 87 percent of respondents rated the Parks and Recreation Department satisfactory to excellent when it came to providing recreation programs that serve the needs of residents.

Survey questions focused on areas of the park that are considered under-utilized, including the "Back 40" and the sand volleyball courts. More than 60 percent of respondents want the volleyball courts to stay and 25 percent want to leave the Back 40 alone.

The most popular suggested alternate use for the Back 40, favored by 10 percent of respondents, was a dog park; although when the same idea was raised during the Rancho Laguna dog park drama it was met with strong opposition. Others suggested tennis courts for the Back 40 or sand volleyball site.

The survey also reflected a desire for more senior and teen activities, and additional bocce ball courts.

The lack of clear, overriding needs puzzled the commission. "So have we gotten anything out of this (the survey)?" asked vice chair Robert Lucacher. "My biggest disappointment is that we have an entire group of Moraga citizens, people with kids who use the park, who don't seem to have expressed strong needs," said commissioner John Haffner.

Resident David Shapiro suggested that "the survey wasn't good enough. It didn't go out to the entire community. You weren't getting what they (the residents) would like to see."

Another Moraga resident told the commission, "What I have noticed is that people don't necessarily have an opinion until something happens, until the town makes a move; then people will react to it. If you come up with a plan then you'll get opinions, otherwise everybody is happy with the park."

Commissioners imagined other ways to improve the Commons. Haffner supported additional bocce courts. Lucacher suggested a community garden on the Back 40, "where people could rent a little piece of land, plant some vegetables and practice the essentials of sustainability."

Another problem was summed up by Haffner: "The question is who is going to pay for it?"

Chair Karen Reed proposed a homework assignment for the commissioners as the next step in the process - to identify specific ideas, with sources of funding, for future review and analysis. Moragans with ideas and suggestions are invited to attend the next commission meeting or submit written comments; check the town's website for the date and time.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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