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Work in Process Planning Commission hits a snag; approves design review changes

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A Moraga Planning Commission vote on modifications to the town's setback requirements had to be postponed because a final draft resolution was not available at its July 29 meeting. Homeowners in attendance were visibly frustrated - many have projects on hold pending clarification of the setback limits for older homes.

Despite lengthy discussion of the modifications at earlier meetings and concurrence among the majority of commissioners as to what the final regulation should look like, chair Frank Comprelli determined that in the absence of a draft document no vote to conclude the issue could take place and the item was continued to an unspecified future date.

Since the commission's Aug. 19 meeting has been canceled, Sept. 2 is the earliest date commissioners could consider the resolution that would clarify rules regarding home extensions for older residences that were constructed before the town established its own setback limits. County rules were somewhat different than the town's and were not enforced as stringently. The new ordinance would affect thousands of residents. After the commission votes on the resolution, the Moraga Town Council will make the final decision.

Also on the agenda, listed under "Routine and Other Matters," was the first study session on possible revisions to rules governing development on slopes, ridgelines and open space. Residents unfamiliar with the town's processes were stunned that the commission's consideration of a major issue was not noticed well in advance, but this first study session was just a preliminary discussion of a topic that's likely to open months, if not years, of public hearings at which residents will have ample opportunity to present their views and arguments.

Comprelli later explained that agendas are not the correct place to provide detailed information about processes, although he asked planning staff to make sure that agendas are written in common English and avoid planning jargon as much as possible.

There was one item on the evening's agenda that had a resolution attached to it - an amendment that extends to multi-family and commercial districts the same design review exemptions that single-family residents enjoy when minor inside or outside remodeling is done.

Prior to this modification, if residents of a multi-family dwelling wanted to resurface a deck, upgrade their windows or change something inside their home they had to go through a design review board hearing, a costly process that delays projects. The amendment allows planning staff to review the project and determine the level of environmental scrutiny it should go through; simple projects can get administrative approval.

The list of 18 projects exempt from design review includes interior remodel, replacement of doors and windows, installation of a small satellite dish, demolition and removal of outdoor structures, replacement of flooring material for decks, and installation of low voltage path lights and solar tubes.

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