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Moraga Revisits Sign Ordinance

By Sophie Braccini

At the last session of the Design Review Board on Sept. 9 Shawna Brekke-Read, Moraga's planning director, stated that a review of the town's sign ordinance had become the highest priority.

This declaration came as new signs were discussed for Wells Fargo and Union Bank in the Moraga Center and the weakness of the current code was made painfully clear when board members could not arrive at a decision using the existing language.

Revising the sign ordinance will be a long process. In the meantime, steps will be taken to amend the temporary sign rules and the board asked that the owners of the local shopping centers define a master sign plan prior to accepting new signs from different tenants.

Wells Fargo was looking for approval of a new commercial sign and ATM along Moraga Way. The bank, located on a property owned by the Bruzzone family but not technically part of the Moraga Center, had no problem getting approval for its sign.

Union Bank however, while located not far from Wells Fargo, is part of the Bruzzone-owned Moraga Center and is set back 300 feet from Moraga Road. It was seeking approval for a monument sign (a sign set into the ground with low overall height) along the arterial to increase visibility. Sign designer Robin Esquivel, who has been working with the town since January, explained how new requirements had been given to her over the 9-month period only to end in a hearing at which nothing was resolved.

Former Chamber of Commerce president Edy Schwartz made a passionate plea to have the town's sign rules revised. "We need to look at the sign ordinance in a much broader way because the town, the residents, and the businesses have changed," she said. "A monument sign could really improve the Moraga Center....I hope that you realize how important this is."

Board chair Ben Helber noted that new businesses need a sign plan that describes the type, size and style of the commercial signage when they get their approval. When it was constructed, the Moraga Center didn't need one; but board members felt reluctant to agree with a monument for one business when a comprehensive plan was not in place for the entire shopping center. "Let the property owner prepare a master plan for the signs in this shopping center," said Helber. "It won't happen unless we demand it now."

Esquivel noted that the bank had no leverage to insist that the property owner develop a master sign plan now, but board members decided that such a plan would avoid the granting of piecemeal authorizations to different businesses in the same shopping center and that once a master sign plan is approved, each business could get administrative approval for its individual signs.

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