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Ridgeline and Hillside Committee Appointments

By Sophie Braccini

Mayor David Trotter recently highlighted the importance of the General Plan amendment process to clarify the rules applied to development on ridgelines and hillsides. A committee was appointed that will prepare a plan for the Town Council's approval. It is supposed to include people with different opinions on the issue. The stakes are high, as the results of the effort could limit the ability of property owners to develop the last large areas of undeveloped land in Moraga.

This committee will meet in public session. It is comprised of two members of the Town Council, Dave Trotter and Mike Metcalf; two Planning Commissioners, Frank Comprelli and Stacia Levenfeld; and one Design Review Board member and a Parks and Recreation commissioner yet to be named. "This committee does not have a charter yet," said the mayor, meaning that the scope of the work has not been defined. Planning director Shawna Brekke-Read asked each body to select members who would represent different opinions in town.

Since he's been on the Town Council, Trotter has been on record supporting the protection of ridgelines from development and minimizing the grading of slopes. His interpretation of the General Plan is that all ridgelines should be free of development, as he argued during the appeal of the Rancho Laguna II development project approval. Metcalf said that he accepted the committee post to protect the interests of Moraga. "The town needs to respect property rights and due process," he said. "I am concerned about regulatory taking of private property that could lead to the town being taken to court." Metcalf believes that the code needs to be cleaned up, not rewritten. "We need to simplify a process that's clumsy. We will hire planners to get us a very usable product for all."

Comprelli sees himself as being open-minded; he has not been on the Planning Commission long enough to have a significant record one way or the other - he voted to support the development of a home on Donald Drive on a very steep slope. "There is not a lot of property left. All of the easy ones have already been developed," he said. "The bulk that are left, including the two major properties, Bollinger Canyon and Indian Valley, have massive ridgelines and hillsides. Each project needs to be evaluated on its own merit." Levenfeld, who works in public policy and development, also says that her mind is not made up yet. "My interest is to explore and understand what is intended by the language of the General Plan, and all the possible angles, to decide the fair interpretation."

For years now people who want to see development in Moraga and people who want to protect as much open space as possible have been fighting over every development project that comes down the pike. The line of fracture is not as simple as Democrats versus Republicans, or property owners against open space advocates; many residents want to see housing and economic development, for the good of the community, without heavily impacting open space.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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