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Signs Under Scrutiny

By *Sophie Braccini*

About seven years ago the file regarding updates to the Town of Moraga's sign ordinance opened, and then closed. Planning director Shawna Brekke-Read recently found the staff strength required to revisit the issue. Meetings were conducted with the Chamber of Commerce to understand the needs of local retailers, other jurisdictions' regulations were studied and staff released a proposal to the Design Review Board on Dec. 9.

The proposed changes include allowing one portable sign per business (A-frame; maximum of 6 square feet per side); one illuminated window sign per business (but no blinking signs); banners to be displayed for one month (renewable after one month off); limiting the size and number of non-permanent free standing non-commercial signs (such as political signs) with a maximum of 60 days; wall signs of up to 100 square feet in commercial areas and externally illuminated outside wall signs without public review.

Ella Samonsky, associate planner, presented the new plan to the board. "The current language set minimal standards for all signs, and then we have special sections for special use signs," explained Samonsky. "The process of approving signs relies heavily on design review. If the sign does not meet the standards, it has to go to the design review board for approval." She added that this current process allows for almost open-ended opportunities to request exceptions and modifications. The result is a possible lack of consistency, and a process that can be long and not always predictable as to its outcome.

"Sign regulation has to be content neutral (by law), so we are proposing to regulate based on zoning district, duration of the sign (temporary or permanent) and physical form of the sign," said Samonsky. Every sign application will then fall into a specific category with its specific set of standards. It will be easier for applicants to design compliant signs that won't necessitate long and costly public review. Open-ended modifications will not be allowed anymore, unless the situation presents a unique challenge.

The new code also requires new developments with multiple tenants to get a master sign program approved. For existing buildings with three or more tenants, staff will require a plan when a major renovation or new monument sign is proposed.

Signs that would have a potential important visual impact will continue to be reviewed by the board, such as monument signs, cinema marquee and internally illuminated signs. Wall and shingle signs will be reviewed administratively. Window signs, temporary signs and signs conforming to a master sign program would not require a permit.

Members of the public who came to the meeting praised staff, for the most part, for clarifying and simplifying the process. Some asked for more flexibility. Harry Singh, of Mountain Mike's Pizza, asked to be allowed to have someone standing along Moraga Road with a sign from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. to signal the open buffet. Board members were not enthused by this request. Gayle Somers of Cafe Hacienda, who is working on another location near Chef Chao, asked to be able to signal her incoming business with a banner for as long as the remodel lasts. The board did not agree to allow a banner for longer than one month at a time.

Kathe Nelson, the executive director of the chamber of commerce, emphasized the need for the new rules to be equitable and enforceable, with simple standards that are clear and concise. Presently the rules are very difficult to enforce, unless the signs are in the public right of way, because there is no code enforcement regulation like there is in other jurisdictions.

The revisions will be reviewed by the Planning Commission before being presented for the Town Council's approval early next year.

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