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Councilmember Accuses Moraga Planning Commission of Insubordination

By Sophie Braccini

Moraga Councilmember Mike Metcalf is known for his direct language, but rarely, if ever, has he publicly scolded appointed commissioners for their actions - until the May 14 meeting of the Moraga Town Council, when he announced that the Planning Commission committed "an act of outright insubordination." The design of a pedestrian bridge and a new crosswalk on Moraga Road is the bone of contention that led to the confrontation.

The bridge and crosswalk are part of the pending Summerhill Homes development on Camino Ricardo and will link the Moraga Commons to a new nature area on the opposite side of Moraga Road. The Planning Commission had decided that the crosswalk should not be set at the level of the skate park, because a majority of planning commissioners believed it was too close to the bend in the road and presented safety issues. But when the Town Council reviewed the development agreement it decided that the bridge should indeed be at the level of the skate park and asked the Planning Commission to change the conditions of approval to align with its decision.

Planning commissioners instead upheld their first decision.

"In our prepared staff report we outlined for the commission what the Town Council had done and had directed the developer to do," explained Shawna Brekke-Read, planning director. "We recommended that the commission follow the Council's lead and change the conditions of approval," at its April 21 meeting.

The commission voted 4-1-1 to confirm the conditions of approval without the change requested by the Town Council. Chair Christine Kuckuk cast the dissenting vote and commissioner Steve Woehleke abstained.

After the Town Council meeting, planning commissioner Frank Comprelli said he was saddened, disappointed and a little disturbed by Metcalf's statement. "To the best of my knowledge, the commission is an independent body," he said. "Our role is to discuss issues and make decisions that can be overruled by the Town Council. We are not subservient to or controlled by the Town Council; it is perfectly okay for it to make a final, and different, decision."

At the end of his statement, Metcalf said that he would be pleased to learn that "those planning commissioners ... have tendered their resignations."

Mayor Ken Chew said later that the entire Town Council agreed with Metcalf. "The Planning Commission is an advisory body that carries out the policy decisions made by the Council," he stated. The Town Council overturned the Planning Commission's decision, which had been appealed by the developer, and confirmed the positioning of the bridge and crosswalk near the skate park.

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