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New Rules for Signs in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini

Local business owners and the Moraga Chamber of Commerce have repeatedly voiced concern over the lack of visibility of local businesses. The Moraga Planning Commission recently completed its task of revising the town's sign ordinance - the introduction of a few new concepts should allow businesses in Moraga to spend less time and money installing compliant signs that may make it a bit easier to attract potential customers. The revisions will likely go into effect this summer.

The Town Council will consider the question of how to enforce the new rules as it discusses the enforcement and nuisance abatement code on Wednesday, May 21.

The modifications to the sign ordinance were conceived with a number of rules supporting business visibility. As a general rule Moraga only allows signs that are indirectly lit by a non-visible light source, but soon a business could have a single, internally-lit window sign as long as it doesn't blink. The code also allows for portable signs to be installed in commercial districts for a year, as long as they are removed at night, not lit, and not more than four feet high.

Other regulations were added with the intent to simplify and clarify the permit process. Many signs will now be approved administratively and will no longer require a lengthy and costly Design Review Board hearing. Such signs include wall signs of less than 50 square feet, portable signs, awning signs, permanent non-lit window signs, and signs conforming to something new in Moraga: a master sign program.

A master sign program is a set of rules that are common to multi-tenant business areas and approved by the town. New multi-tenant areas must seek approval for their master sign programs; existing multi-tenant shopping areas will not be required to get a sign plan approved unless a space of more than 5,000 square feet is renovated, or a new monument sign is envisioned, or a new conditional use permit is requested.

Commercial property owners who came to the Planning Commission meeting expressed regrets over what they perceive as a tendency by government bodies to over-regulate and create hindrances to a healthy competitive climate. Ella Samonsky, the town's associate planner, believes otherwise. "A master sign program will give the opportunity to any new or existing tenant to get their sign approved administratively if it is conforming to the group's pre-approved rules," she said. At this time, the only multi-tenant area in town that has a master sign program is the Rheem Shopping Center.

In addition, the 2014-2015 capital improvement plan should include way-finding signs that direct people to shopping areas and the revised sign code includes provisions for way-finding signs inside shopping centers.

Commissioners asked that the rules be reviewed after a year, with special attention paid to portable signs. The Town Council will have two readings of the revised code, in May and June, and it should go into effect in July.

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