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## Moraga Turns 40

By Sophie Braccini



Then-governor Ronald Reagan presented the certification plaque to new Moraga Town Council members (from left) Mike Cory, Sue McNulty, Merle Gilliland and Barry Gross in Sacramento. The fifth council member, Bill Combs, was unable to make the trip. Photo courtesy Moraga Historical Society

remembers longtime resident Dick Olsen, who bought a new house in Moraga in 1972. "So I immediately got involved with the Moraga Community Association." He became the chair of the association's civic affairs committee, which was reviewing development plans for Moraga with the county.

"One of our concerns was that the format for these developments was all townhouses," recalls Olsen. He cites The Vineyard project that proposed close to 1,000 townhouses in Sanders Ranch. "The county's General Plan for Moraga proposed a build out of 52,000 people, says Olsen. "It was premised on two freeways coming into Moraga." Those freeways are also the reason Moraga has two shopping centers.

For many years, the state had plans for a pair of new freeways to converge in Moraga: The Shepherd Canyon Freeway was to run from Highway 13 in Oakland through Canyon to what is now the entrance to the Moraga Country Club. The path of the Gateway Freeway would have started at Highway 24's Gateway exit (now the Wilder exit) just west of the Caldecott Tunnel and run up through the valley. The two freeways were to merge in town and follow the current route of the Lafayette-Moraga Trail into Lafayette and beyond.

"Merle Gilliland, Mike Cory and I coined an acronym for what the county wanted to do to Moraga: CCCCC - the Condo Clustered Capital of Contra Costa County," he says. "We wanted to preserve the semi-rural character of our town."

The turning point was when the state passed the California Environmental Quality Act, requiring the study of environmental impacts for new developments. Cory, Gilliland and Olsen asked the county commission for a one-year moratorium on all development until a traffic study could be completed that would analyze what the impact of the new developments would be. "We believed that the town should foster single-family homes and deal with the roadway problem," says Olsen. The county approved the moratorium and the study; and privately, according to Olsen,

Forty years is a big milestone in anyone's life, and so it is for Moraga, which is preparing to celebrate its 40th birthday this year. A look at the reasons why residents decided it was important to incorporate offers perspective on the town's identity; although the pressing issues of the past were not that different from those the town is grappling with in the present.

Seventy-three percent of the 8,434 registered voters went to the polls in November, 1974, and after the ballots were counted the proponents of incorporation declared victory by a 60-40 margin. The first five Moraga Town Council members, elected from a pool of 13 candidates, took their seats on the dais.

Incorporation came after years of work by the Moraga Community Association, which was trying to curb the development that was supported by county administrators, despite residents who thought independence was not financially viable and would lead to the infringement of property owners' rights.

"I was horrified by the way bulldozers were cutting into the hills and doing massive grading,"

commissioners asked the three residents to start the incorporation process so they would never have to see them again.

During the preparation work for incorporation, Moraga resident Bob Merritt, an attorney with a prominent San Francisco firm, met with Joe Connery, the executive director of the Local Agency Formation Commission, and negotiated the city's limits. One initial idea was to incorporate the part of Orinda that is now Wilder.

The incorporation team believed that the Gateway area should be under the control of the town of Moraga to insure later construction. Moraga favored the Gateway Freeway but could not stop its demise. The plans for both freeways were killed in the mid '70s by the State Highway Commission due to "financial constraints."

It is interesting to note that Connery refused to include the Gateway area in Moraga's incorporation map - at the time, he supported the idea of an incorporated Lamorinda.

There were many residents who did not support incorporation. A group that called itself "Keep Moraga Unincorporated" was formed, headed by Allan Odell, with Mikki Chatter, Vincent Matteuci and Elliott Abers. One of their main concerns was that the tax burden on residents would be much higher than the 16 cents per \$100 valuation promised by pro-incorporation supporters. Keep Moraga Unincorporated maintained that 91 cents per \$100 would be a more realistic number and that the cost for administration and public works had been grossly underestimated.

Large developers also opposed incorporation. "Limitation on property rights was our No. 1 concern," recalls Clark Wallace, who owned 1,000 acres in Moraga. "We knew that if approval authority was moved from the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors to a Moraga City Council it would significantly inhibit our ability to develop Moraga. Opposition (was) a rationale business decision on our part," he says, adding that he is very proud of the pre-incorporation era accomplishments.

Joan Bruzzone, whose husband Russ was also a major pre-incorporation developer and whose family continues to be the largest property owner in Moraga, says that incorporation was a very stressful process and the new town has made development more of a challenge than ever. "There was nothing that gave my husband more pleasure and satisfaction than to build homes for families," she adds.

Voters approved Measure M for Moraga and the town was born. The official name of the 15th city in Contra Costa County was the City of the Town of Moraga. The first council was comprised of mayor Mike Cory and council members Merle Gilliland, Bill Combs, Barry Gross and Sue McNulty (now Sue McNulty Rainey).

Rainey, who was the only woman on the council and later became Moraga's fourth mayor, recalls the council's first meeting. "We had a very large turnout; the whole JM auditorium was full. The spirit was excellent, and I remember that at that first meeting, we spent the most time on what graphic should be on the town's seal!" But the town quickly started work on its own General Plan and control of its own destiny.

Today, the issues of development and traffic impacts are still at the forefront. Town Manager Jill Keimach cannot imagine the town had it not incorporated. "It is about local control and being able to elect and appoint individuals from the community who represent their views," she says.

Toast to Moraga - 40th Anniversary Celebration

6 to 8 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 27 at the Moraga Commons Park

Community picnic-style (bring your own) dinner in the park to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the incorporation of the Town of Moraga. DJ RyanO and Campolindo High School musicians will provide the evening's entertainment. Attendees are encouraged to bring a potluck from home or pre-order food from participating local restaurants. Each six-foot table comes with six chairs and a bottle of sparkling juice for \$35; you can reserve as many tables as you like. Pre-registration is required - the registration deadline is Sept. 12. For more information, and to register, go to [www.moraga.ca.us/BookingRetrieve.aspx?ID=224022](http://www.moraga.ca.us/BookingRetrieve.aspx?ID=224022).

"Remembering 40 Years"

Saturday, Oct. 18

Saint Mary's College Soda Center

The Moraga Historical Society, the Town of Moraga and St. Mary's College will be "Remembering 40 Years." Cocktails and conversation will begin at 6 p.m., followed by dinner at 7 p.

m. Featured speakers will represent each decade of incorporation: Barry Gross and Sue McNulty Rainey for the first decade, followed by Margaret DePriester and Greg Crossley, Frank Sperling and Bill Vaughan, and finally current town council members Mike Metcalf and Dave Trotter. For more information or to purchase tickets, contact Susan Sperry at (925) 376-3053. The registration deadline is Oct. 14.



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