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Moraga's New Planning Director: Ellen Clark

By Sophie Braccini



Ellen Clark explains the Livable Moraga Road concept to a resident during the Pear Festival Photo Andy Scheck

When Shawna Brekke-Read left her job as Moraga's planning director for a nice new gig in South Lake Tahoe, senior planner Ellen Clark was appointed interim director. It did not take long for Town Manager Jill Keimach to decide that promoting from within was the right strategy, and Clark is now the town's planning director. She directs a department that is tackling many projects and issues, and she is already familiar with the topics and the people. Clark brings to the department the calm and endurance of a marathon runner.

Clark began her career in 2000 with a consulting firm in Berkeley; she decided to move to the town of Mammoth Lakes with her husband, an architect, when she had her first child. She was the small town's acting planning director when she applied for the senior planner position in Moraga a year and a half ago. "The family wanted to go back to the Bay Area, and I picked Moraga because it was a similar size community, where you get to work on very different types of projects, which I find more interesting," she says.

Clark has found that in Moraga, even when the projects are small, the issues are complicated; so her analytical mind is challenged. "I was thinking about it as we are looking for a new planner," she explains. "Moraga is this little town of just 16,000 people, suburban, mostly residential, but with enough issues to keep it very stimulating." Clark especially appreciates that residents are interested, involved and actively participate in the public process. She says that it is sometimes hard to engage people, but there have been good turnouts at outreach sessions for the Livable Moraga Road project and the review of development rules for

ridgelines and slopes. Clark seeks community consensus on issues before plans are brought to the Town Council for final approval.

There was some reluctance to put topics on the council's agenda, in the weeks leading up to the recent election, which might become overly politicized. Now the process to study possible amendments to the town's code regarding development on ridgelines and slopes will move forward; the council will work on zoning changes in the area of the Moraga Center Specific Plan; and a new project proposed by Jerry Loving for multi-family housing next to the Rheem Theatre will start its rounds of study sessions - while several in-progress developments, including Rancho Laguna II, off Rheem Boulevard; Via Moraga, across from the Rheem Shopping Center; the City Ventures project on Moraga Way; and Summerhill Homes' Camino Ricardo project, proceed along the sinuous development pathway.

To these relatively short term projects Clark adds some long term objectives. "The plan to improve the Rheem Shopping Center has gone on the back-burner," she says. "The General Plan

envisioned a Specific Plan for that area; the question is should we invest in a plan for that center or can we work on focused General Plan amendments and zoning changes?" She knows that the crafting of the Moraga Center Specific Plan cost \$1 million and took seven years. She also sees tremendous opportunity for improvements to the existing municipal code, which she views as a very old fashion and cumbersome document. She acknowledges that some work has already been done, including a review of the sign ordinance, but she would like to have time to do a complete clean-up.

When she is not in the town offices or spending time with her family, Clark runs. She already has four marathons under her belt. She says that sometimes, in the middle of a run, she may wonder why she is doing something so hard; but at the end of the race she derives great happiness from a sense of achievement.

Livable Moraga Road Project Starts to Gel

Moraga's Planning Commission, Design Review Board, and Parks and Recreation Commission met in October to discuss the recommendation of the Livable Moraga Road advisory committee regarding reconfigurations of Moraga Road designed to make the arterial more friendly and safe to all types of users.

Over the course of several public workshops, the two areas found to be most in need of improvement are the Campolindo High School area, where drop-off and pick-up creates havoc on weekdays during the school year, and the section of Moraga Road between Corliss Drive and Donald Drive where several adjacent streets merge, more or less efficiently, onto the arterial.

Town staff proposed a new configuration for drop-off at the high school, but has not yet been able to get a commitment from the school district to work with the town on the project. It is essential to have the district's support since some modifications are likely to be necessary on the campus itself. Moraga's planning director noted that grants such as Safe Routes to Schools are available to fund such projects.

Of the different configurations to improve the Donald Drive to Corliss Drive section of Moraga Road, an alternative that envisions two northbound lanes, one traffic lane southbound, one center turning lane, and parking on alternate sides, as well as sidewalks, bike lanes and a multi-use path, garnered a majority of support.

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[back](#)

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