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## Moraga Citizens Network Celebrates 10 Years

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Ellen Beans, Marcia Farrar and Judy Helder Photo provided

Network (MCN) was born, with the simple objective of "promoting participatory democracy in Moraga."

Schwartz presented the project to the town council and received a cold reception from then mayor Mike Majchrzak, but this didn't stop the group. They began attending all the meetings and spreading information through their email newsletter. "In 2007, during his State of the Town address, Mike (Majchrzak) said in front of everybody that he wanted to apologize to Edy Schwartz, that he did not believe me and thought the group had an agenda, and that he was wrong and hoped everyone would support them," says Schwartz.

"Our first big information campaign came with the 2006 election," remembers Beans.

"We printed and sent our first mailing to all voters with a Q&A answered by all the candidates." The mailing was funded privately by MCN members. MCN also organized its first candidates' night in partnership with the League of Women Voters. Schwartz, Beans and a few friends advertized the forum by going door-to-door to every retailer in both shopping centers and asking to put flyers in their windows.

MCN members continued to participate in meetings, listen and sometimes comment, especially when issues dealt with freedom of speech or information for the public. In 2007 the website [Moragacitizensnetwork.org](http://Moragacitizensnetwork.org) was up and running and by 2008, MCN had 500 members. "We always had a table at the Pear Festival, at the Fourth of July, and spread the word that way about our activities," says Beans.

Then in 2008 there was a heated battle in Moraga, not only between council member candidates, but also about ballot measures that would affect land use. Knowing that the stakes were high, some people in town started questioning the neutrality of MCN. Beans welcomed them to participate in the draft of the questions that were going to be asked at the Open Space Initiative forum that MCN organized at Saint Mary's College with proponents of each measure. It was also the year the Moraga Center Specific Plan's report was produced. The group videotaped the report and made DVD copies that were available in the library and other public places. Lamorinda Weekly began taping the candidates' nights and making them available online.

Now whenever the public needs to be informed about an upcoming meeting, initiative or workshop, staff sends the information to Beans for publication in the newsletter, MCN Link. In

Ten years ago, a small group of friends passionate about the democratic process felt there was a need to inform the people of Moraga and get them more involved in their local government. The group that started with 22 people in January of 2005 is now over 1,400 members strong. Members receive a bi-weekly e-newsletter about everything Moraga, put together by Ellen Beans.

In 2005 there were only two places to find the town's meeting agendas: the library and the town office, says Edy Schwartz. To see a staff report about an issue, residents had to make an appointment with staff to take a look in person, and only summaries of the meeting minutes were available on the town's website, months after the meetings.

Schwartz called a meeting with a few friends, including Beans, and they started discussing what they thought was needed in town. Moraga Citizens

recent years, information about Saint Mary's College and service group activities were added to the newsletter. "MCN provides such a critical service to the community since citizens can rely on it for providing unbiased and transparent information," says Town Manager Jill Keimach. "Ellen (Beans) is one of the first people we call when we need to get the word out about something quickly." She adds that MCN's candidate forum provides all residents the opportunity to get to know and hear from candidates, again in a manner that is "non-political and unbiased."

The group's objective for the next decade? Reach the next generation of Moragans.

Beans and Schwartz acknowledge that a lot of progress has been made to provide information in town. Agendas, staff reports and minutes (including audio and, soon, video) are available online and the town publishes "About Town," which succinctly explains what happened from a civic perspective. "But it is hard to get information to the people on complex issues," says Schwartz, whose current objective is to get younger generations informed and involved in the land use questions the town will debate this year.

The Moraga Town Council will honor MCN tonight with a proclamation thanking the group for all it has done to expand participatory democracy in Moraga. The current MCN board includes Ellen Beans, Larry Beans, Mike Bernhardt, Tory Courtney, Denise Duff, Janet Forman, John Haffner and Tom Marnane. To sign up for the MCN newsletter, go to [moragacitizensnetwork.org](http://moragacitizensnetwork.org).



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