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Published June 3rd, 2015

Saint Mary's Intramural Field Will Stay Lit Until 10PM

By Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Town Council authorized Saint Mary's College May 20 to extend the hours of operation from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. on the intramural field adjacent to Bollinger Canyon Road. While the meeting had its highly emotional moments among the neighbors opposed to the extended hours, Vice Mayor Mike Metcalf conducted an orderly discussion. The conditions of approval for the extra hour included a maximum noise limit of 55 decibels between the hours of 9 and 10 p.m. and the obligation of SMC public safety personnel to investigate complaints and abate delinquent behaviors. The council will review the decision in a year.

Since the college first opened the intramural field to evening play, neighbors living in The Bluffs off of Bollinger Canyon Road say they have traded a quiet atmosphere away from freeways for the bright lights and noise students generate as they play in the evening, almost year-round. The college's view is that the field is a key component of its recreational offerings for students, and has made it clear that the field needed to be available until at least 10 p.m. Saint Mary's President James Donahue noted the college wants to be a good neighbor.

At a meeting last March, the council outlined conditions the college needed to meet regarding the noise and lights before approving the extra hour of operation. These requests included strengthening the way complaints from neighbors were received and logged as well as outlining how the college would enforce rules once the complaints were acknowledged.

Since that meeting, Saint Mary's staff conducted an acoustical analysis, measuring noise levels at the field and at residents' houses, with the intent to differentiate the noise coming from the field from the ambient noise coming from traffic or other sources. The result of the analysis was that the field's activities added only 2 decibels to the ambient noise, with a maximum of 59 decibels, a level characterized by staff as a little high but within most commonly accepted community noise standards.

Councilmember Dave Trotter challenged the results, indicating that the normal level in the quiet Bluffs was in the mid- to high-40s, while noise levels when the field was used could rise to 59 at the homes.

Councilmember Teresa Onoda, who walked the neighborhood and talked to many of the residents, declared that the level of noise should be restricted at the field level, not a level at the residents' homes, and that it should be limited to 55 decibels.

The final decision to limit the level to 55 decibels at the residents' homes is somewhat lower than in the cities of Orinda and Lafayette, which authorize 60 and 58 decibels until 10 p.m., respectively. Concerns were also raised regarding the responsiveness of the college's department of public safety and its ability to act when logging complaints. The resolution states that SMC public safety will investigate when called about a noise complaint and verify by measurement with a noise meter. They will then promptly abate the noise.

The one-year period will start as soon as the college has installed the new lighting system that should significantly reduce the glare in The Bluffs neighborhood. During the meeting Peter Michell, vice president for finance at Saint Mary's College, indicated that the institution wanted to start working on this project as soon as possible with a target completion date of August.

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[back](#)

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