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Moraga Center Specific Plan Zoning Changes Discussed

By Sophie Braccini

The difference between conventional zoning and form-based code might make an interesting technical discussion for many planning experts, but the consequence of using one zoning code versus another makes a significant difference in the shaping of a city.

The Town of Moraga chose the form-based code to rezone the area covered by the Moraga Center Specific Plan. The purpose is to create a predictable framework that future developers will use to construct the residents' vision for their downtown. The MCSP Implementation Project steering committee comprised of councilmembers, members of the

planning commission, design review board and parks and recreation commission started a series of public meetings with the town's staff and consultant Stefan Pellegrini from Opticos Design to define the new zoning.

The introductory meeting was held at the Hacienda de las Flores June 3. Moraga Planning Director Ellen Clark explained that the conventional zoning code does not address important elements such as the relationship between building facades and the public realm, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks, while form-based zoning does.

Pelligrini opened the meeting by

explaining the differences of form-based code. "A form-based code is a land development regulation that fosters predictable built results by using physical form as the organizing principle for the code, rather than separation of uses," he explained. Instead of "single family residential" zoning, for example, the code would be called "traditional neighborhood," with a description of the physical form of that area, regardless of the type of use. Form-based code also articulates transitions between the most rural to the most densely populated habitats, also called transects.

The regulations and standards in form-based codes are presented using

both words and visual interpretations.

The consultant asked the members of the steering committee what their vision was for the MCSP. Most members wanted to create a real town center along a street that would be the extension of School Street along the Ranch area reaching St. Mary's Road. The committee indicated a need to integrate pedestrian and bicycle use downtown, create gathering places, and minimize the visual impact of car parking. Councilmember Dave Trotter said he would like to see the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Trail meander along the creek in the Ranch area.

The only member of the public in

attendance, Dave Bruzzone, whose family owns most of the MCSP land, agreed that the family's vision includes taking advantage of the charm of a promenade along the creek, but not as part of the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Trail.

The meeting documents are posted on the town website at <http://www.moraga.ca.us/dept/planning/MCSP-ImplementationProject>. A community-wide meeting will be organized this fall. The next committee meeting is tentatively scheduled for June 25 or 29 and will address design principals. The exact date will be posted on the town website at [moraga.ca.us](http://www.moraga.ca.us).

A Short Reprieve For the Rheem Theatre

By Sophie Braccini

Nearly 100 concerned citizens attended the June 10 Town Council meeting to learn the fate of The New Rheem Theatre, after management announced June 6 that the prominent venue would close at the end of the month due to a 60 percent increase in rent.

Over the years, Rheem property owner Mahesh Puri had reduced the rent from \$18,000 to \$10,000, then \$5,000, subsidizing the theater's operations, but said he could no longer afford the costs. Derek Zemrak, managing member of Zemrak Pirkle Productions, LLC that operates the theater, said they could not afford the rent increase. The property has been for sale since September 2014, with no offers. Fortunately,

Town Manager Jill Keimach helped negotiate a reprieve and stated the community would now focus on finding a long-term solution.

During the few days leading up to the council meeting, Keimach met with Puri and Zemrak, and said the town, the owner and the operator reached an agreement to keep movies running until the town can come back with a more developed vision and plan in the next several months. The long-term vision, Keimach explained, is to have an agreement that doesn't involve the historic preservation ordinance. While the property owner can develop other areas of the property, Puri agreed not to demolish the

theater building, so the need for the ordinance goes away, she said.

While the plan is unknown specifically at this time, Keimach said she felt like all three sides really want to do what's best to keep the theater running as a theater. The plan also involves the development or the formulation of a community foundation. "I think that is key to allowing the community members, the town, and potentially other investors to contribute to a community foundation that in the long term can hopefully have ownership of the theater building, preserving the theater as a theater for movies and community events."

Moraga resident Andy Schreck, owner of

Lamorinda Weekly, presented the community foundation idea to the council. Schreck came up with the idea for a foundation in Moraga after his involvement in a project the Lafayette Community Foundation helped to complete. "After I was informed that the theater would have to close because the subsidized rent would go up, I decided now is the time to start the Moraga Community Foundation," he said. Prior to establishing the foundation, Schreck plans to present the foundation's means and vision to the community at an information meeting scheduled at 7 p.m. June 23 at the Holy Trinity Cultural Center, 1700 School Street.

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