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New Electronic Sign Spurs Controversy

By Sophie Braccini



Photo Andy Scheck

The town of Moraga installed an electronic sign along Moraga Road, opposite the Commons Park, to display electronically lit revolving community messages. The new system, which was approved by the council months ago and replaced the old black and white unlit marquee, immediately spurred mostly negative comments as residents were blinded at night by the color messages. Town staff started manually dimming the system at night, but some continue to argue that the new display is a safety hazard, due to its location.

"We agree that the sign is way too bright when the sun goes down," responded Town Manager Jill Keimach to a resident mid-July. "Unfortunately, Comcast (has not) connected the sign yet, so staff has manually dimmed it for tonight and every evening until we have a computer connection. Hopefully, once the

operational kinks are resolved, people will begin to appreciate it as a better way to communicate, especially in an emergency. Please be patient until we have it connected electronically."

The installation of the sign started a large string of negative messages on the Nextdoor.com social media site. Resident's complaints ranged from poor aesthetics to distractibility while driving, and excessive brightness. A few, however, focused on the functionality rather than the aesthetics and indicated they understood the town's initiative.

"The reasoning behind the sign is that the town really wanted a better way to communicate the small town updates and events," said Dr. Julia Hoang. Bobbie Preston agreed and, in a separate conversation, remembered when she was trying to get support for pruning the local pear orchards and how difficult it was to quickly communicate with the whole town. "This message board allows us to easily change the displays and to broadcast more than one message at one time," she said. "It will be very useful for many community events and needs."

AdArt Senior Account Executive Michael McClure, who was involved with the project since its inception about two years ago, noted that the sign's function and design has been reviewed by the Design Review Board, the Planning Commission and the Town Council during public meetings where residents were encouraged to give their feedback. He acknowledged that installing the sign before the dedicated Comcast Internet link allows for remote control of the sign forces staff to adjust it manually.

A resident did some research and questioned the current Moraga sign location. "Putting aside the aesthetics of the sign, which appear to be subjective and contentious in the community, I think it is better to focus on its location, size, readability and whether it is a distraction to safe driving," says Jonathan Tuck.

Tuck did some research on sign readability using information from Electronic Signs, a competitor to AdArt that built the sign in Moraga, and found that the acceptable exposure time for a message at 35 to 45 miles per hour (for readability) is 8 to 18 seconds. "However at this location traveling at 35 to 45 miles per hour, the maximum view time is more like 2 to 4 seconds and my observations suggest that the sign is currently changing every 5 seconds, which is unacceptable for the character size and viewing distance," he said.

Tuck said that someone who is focused on reading a sign with a non-routine message that is

difficult to read because of small characters, obstructions and short view time, is at risk of not having sufficient reaction time to break if there is an emergency 100 to 200 feet ahead.

"The messages change every 8 seconds, which is the proper duration," said McClure. "The location of the sign was determined by the town, the requirement being that it was installed where the old sign was." McClure believes that the location is appropriate, that even if people are not completely cognizant of it, the messages are subliminally assimilated. If there is too much information to see in the short distance, he recommended shortening the messages.

When the sign was first presented to the council in April of 2014, Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram listed possible distraction of drivers, especially at night, as a potential risk associated with the new sign. But Ingram cited a report by Gene Hawkins with Texas A&M University that indicated that the installation of digital on-premise signs did not lead to a statistically significant increase in crashes on major roads. This study, however, defines on-premise digital signs as signs located on the same property as the business it is advertising, which is not the case of the new community sign. Other studies have been conducted to evaluate the safety risks posed by electronic or video signs, and most concluded that overall impacts on traffic safety are likely to be small.

Ingram said Comcast will install a dedicated Internet line to allow remote operation of the sign, but that a date has not been given to the town yet.

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