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Published September 23rd, 2015

Public Art Policy Proposed in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini

Public art displays have become more prevalent in Orinda and Lafayette, but Moraga has lagged behind, with only a donation policy in place and a few pieces of art donated to the town, such as the statue of kids reading at the library. But recently elected Moraga council member Teresa Onoda, a plein-air artist, is pushing for the adoption of a public art policy.

At its Sept. 9 meeting, council members gave direction for new rules, leaning toward a regulation much like the one in Orinda, where artists loan art to the city that, if well received, is purchased with a mix of public and donated funds.

At the meeting, Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram sought direction and focus from the council members and asked them to think in terms of art acquisition as well as future maintenance of the pieces. Ted Urban, the Orinda resident who proposed the Art in Public Places Committee to the Orinda City Council in 2007, came to the meeting to answer questions.

"The purpose was to bring a wide variety of visual art to public spaces for people to enjoy," explained Urban. Since 2007, some 30 artists have agreed to put one of their pieces on display in various public locations throughout Orinda for a minimum of one year. As some pieces became popular, the committee looked into purchasing them. "A portion of parks and recreation dedication fee can be allocated to purchase art, and the community has to come up with matching funds," explained Urban. When asked by council members how artists came to loan their art to the city, Urban explained that the members of the committee spend time visiting and seeking artists in the Bay Area, and that word of mouth is such that Orinda sometimes get offers from artists who want public exposure.

Moraga residents were supportive of a policy. Muralist and mosaic artist Shweta Srivastava, who recently managed the installation of murals at Camino Pablo Elementary School, spoke about the power of public art. "It gives an identity," she said. "Artwork brings a sense of pride." Lawrence Kohl, founding music director of the Pacific Chamber Symphony and president of the Lamorinda Arts Council, wrote: "Art is amongst us, it gives us a smile and makes us think. It brings community together and shows that we care."

The council members decided not to emulate Lafayette, where developers are required to dedicate 1 percent of construction cost to art, to be displayed either on their site or in a public space, if they alter or build more than 10,000 square feet. "We do not want to add a new fee paid by developers," said Mayor Roger Wykle. Instead, they supported the idea to look further into what Orinda has been doing for eight years.

"Lamorinda could be to the arts what Napa is to wine," concluded Onoda. "It is a brand; a new dimension."

Ingram will bring the topic to the Parks and Recreation Commission, which will discuss the different aspects of a policy and offer its recommendation to the council for final approval. Ingram said his department plans to hold public sessions to hear what residents have to propose regarding a public art policy as well.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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