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Moraga Works to Save the Bees, One Backyard at a Time

By Sophie Braccini



Different sized bee hives in Scheck's apiary
Photo Andy Scheck

Throughout the world, the bee population is threatened and bees are dying. With several probable causes, beekeepers are not sitting around waiting for hypothetical solutions, but are developing practices to insure the sustainability of their bee populations. Moraga Associate Planner Brian Horn researched these practices as he worked on an ordinance to regulate backyard beekeeping in Moraga.

"The first draft of the proposed ordinance did not allow for sustainable small-scale beekeeping," says Moraga beekeeper Andy Scheck, the publisher of Lamorinda Weekly. "Because honey bees die at a rate of 40 to 50 percent every year, if you allow for only two hives, sooner or later you will lose all of your hives." The first text that the planning department proposed in August allowed a maximum of two hives on single-family properties.

As members of the public asked for the rule to be reviewed, the planning commission directed staff to look into the matter.

"We had been using for the base of our work the research that the city of Lafayette had done," explains Horn, "but as residents built their case, I started to do more investigation." Horn looked at other ordinances around the country, from Los Angeles to Florida, and he talked to experts from the local Mount Diablo Beekeepers Association to those at UC Davis.

"Two hives is not enough," Horn says. "When your hives are healthy and large (over 50,000 bees), you split them and create smaller colonies with a queen, or nucleus, in the spring. Over the summer the colonies will grow, then will decline in the fall. Some will survive, and some will not, but with four hives, come the next spring, enough healthy bees should still be there to start the new cycle."

The proposed ordinance authorizes up to four hives in a single-family residence. "Bees need time to adapt to a new environment, and constantly having to get new colonies can be a vector for disease and stress for the bees," says Scheck. "What you want as a beekeeper is to be able to maintain your own bees, even as the number of hives goes up and down." The total number of hives in Scheck's garden has been fluctuating, but since he went from two to four hives, he has been able to keep the population alive and has not needed to purchase new bees.

Local beekeepers supported the proposed ordinance text, approved by the Planning Commission on Oct. 19, and it now goes to the Town Council, along with the new small farm animals regulation, for a final stamp of approval.

The town planner has not received any comments from residents concerned about the bee portion of the ordinance since the text has been in the draft stage. The new text includes a requirement for beekeepers to raise a six-foot barrier between their hives and the neighbors' living areas, if it is less than 100 feet away. "The bees go where they want to go, where the plants they like are," says Horn, "but the six-foot obstacle will redirect their flight upward."

Horn plans to present the proposed text, which includes the new small farm animals rules, to the Town Council at the Nov. 18 meeting or in January. At a prior planning commission meeting, the small farm animals portion of the text was met with large public support and one opposing resident (see the Aug. 26 Lamorinda Weekly article, "Small Animals Ordinance Study Session Goes Smoothly," in the online archives). At the Oct. 19 meeting resident Dale Walwark stated that he

was appalled that the town might be contemplating authorizing the raising and slaughtering of chickens in private gardens.

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