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## Merchants near Rheem sinkhole 'celebrate' first anniversary

By Sophie Braccini



From left, Town Manager Robert Priebe and Edric Kwan (both in a tie) came to the anniversary organized by Ravi Singh (with his back to the camera). Photo Sophie Braccini

shop owner, "but many others have seen a slump in their average income and people explain to them that they just avoid the area and would rather go shop somewhere else."

It was a year ago during a rainstorm that a large metal culvert that carries the Laguna Creek under the intersection at Rheem Boulevard and Moraga Road collapsed, creating a massive sinkhole that swallowed the crossing light and dangerously ruptured several utility lines, including a PG&E gas line. A merchant back on site for the anniversary "party" reminisced how the air smelled of gas and that everyone was so lucky no major fires erupted at the time.

Town staff on site, including Town Manager Robert Priebe and Public Works Director Edric Kwan, informed the group that nothing has happened since last July when they heard that the town had been declared eligible to receive federal funding.

Kwan explained that the eligibility gave the town the right to go through the lengthy process of getting every aspect of its plans approved by the federal agency before it can go to bid. He said that his team has been ready to bid the repairs with contractors for months, but that the town is at the mercy of the Federal Highway Administration's approval process that is happening through the California Department of Transportation. Starting work without proper authorizations would jeopardize the town's ability to be reimbursed for the \$3.3 million of reserve money it will spend to repair the hole.

Priebe gave the example of a recent new requirement that was given to the town to sign a contract with each of the utility agencies involved in the sinkhole, including AT&T, Comcast and PG&E, that they would take care of their own repairs.

Kwan was the city engineer in Richmond when a behemoth sinkhole formed in 2010. He is familiar with the public process and remembers that it took five years in Richmond to complete the repair project and get reimbursement. His projection in Moraga is more optimistic: He expects the approval process to be finalized by May 5; the town council would then approve the bid in June, and construction would take place over the summer. He adds that he also has alternative plans prepared if things do not go according to this timing.

Wendy Scheck, president of the chamber of commerce, said that the merchants at Rheem are indeed frustrated and suffering from the delays, but that the business community acknowledges that town staff is doing the best possible under the circumstances.

Kwan confirmed that the reopening date for the other street segment of Rheem Boulevard between Moraga Road and St. Mary's Road is set at May 1. Kwan also wants to start the repaving of Moraga Road during the coming school spring break.

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[back](#)

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