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Transitions in Moraga - interim town manager to be hired on Dec. 13

By Sophie Braccini

When one asks Planning Director Ellen Clark or Administrative Services Director Amy Cunningham why they are leaving their management positions in Moraga, they give a similar response: a small staff does not provide upward opportunities for managers; the only possibility to get a more important job is to change the city. But why is mid-level staff also leaving Moraga?

The exodus of Moraga staff is severe. The planning department is depleted with only two planners left, now that Associate Planner Coleman Frick announced he is leaving Moraga, and the administrative department is now reduced to only one person with the concomitant resignation of Administrative Services Technician Tina Davis. Transition will take time since the interim town manager may not be tasked with replacing the missing department heads, which will be the choice of the future permanent town manager. Aside from the police force personnel, approximately one third of Moraga town staff has left the town over the past six-months.

Cunningham said that no one on her staff was qualified to become the interim administrative director; when she spoke last week, she said that everything would be organized before her departure to make sure that there is no interruption in services, but she was not sure who would replace her. Yuliya Elbo, the town's accountant, is the only person left.

The planning department will be headed by Senior Planner Derek Farmer, with the support of Brian Horn, associate planner, and Kelly Clancy, senior administrative assistant. Clark said that it is likely that the town will call in consultants on an ad hoc basis to complete on-going projects.

The town will approve at its Dec. 13 meeting the hiring of James Holgersson as interim town manager. The staff report prepared for the Dec. 13 meeting indicates that Holgersson has over 40 years of experience in government management in California and beyond. "He has served as the City Manager and Interim City Manager for the City of Modesto; Deputy City Manager Neighborhoods for the City of San Jose; City Manager for the City of Arlington, Texas; City Manager for the City of Waco, Texas; City Manager for the City of Kalamazoo, Michigan; City Administrator for the City of Germantown, Tennessee; and Senior Assistant to the City Administrator of the City of Davenport, Iowa," states the report.

Council Member Dave Trotter noted that each of the department heads that resigned had their own reasons for seeking promotions and higher paying positions in other cities and that the town of Moraga has historically been an incubator for people working in municipal government positions. "They come here to become first-time department heads in a smaller community, provide excellent service here, get noticed by our neighboring cities, and depart for greener pastures," he said. "The town will get through this, as we have in the past."

Other examples of this phenomenon from the recent past include former town manager Jill Keimach who was hired as the Alameda City Manager after five years in Moraga, or former administrative services director Stephanie Hom who returned to a senior post in Oakland when Libby Schaaf was elected mayor.

Yet, having about a third of staff, police department aside, resigning within a few months of the declaration of fiscal emergency is concerning and raises questions regarding the continuity of operations. Some of the big projects that will need to be continued at the beginning of 2018 include whether or not the town will seek more revenue for storm drains, the completion of the ridgeline and hillside development rules, and the start of MCE as a new energy provider. The only department heads still in place with historical knowledge of the town are city clerk Marty McInturf, Public Works Director Edric Kwan, and Chief of Police Jon B. King.

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