



Published December 27th, 2017

The challenges of planning Moraga: Ellen Clark's last interview

By *Sophie Braccini*

Ellen Clark worked in Moraga for five years, first as senior planner, then as planning director since August 2014; her last day was Dec. 8. Over this period several projects have been completed, but she also recognizes that the town still has work to do in order to exorcise its inner demons and realize its potential. As director, Clark oversaw the Livable Moraga Road project, the approval of the City Ventures project off Moraga Way, and Via Moraga across from the Rheem Shopping Center, the approval of Harvest Court and the other Summerhill project, Bella Vista (Rancho Laguna II), and the adoption of a new commercial planned development process; she led most of the work for the revision of the hillside and ridgeline regulations, and started the zoning process for the Moraga Center Specific Plan. Due to lack of time and resources, some of Clark's long-term goals, such as the update of the Municipal Code, did not materialize. One element of the town's planning that she sees as key to the future of Moraga is the zoning of the Moraga Center Specific Plan. That area in the center of town where Moraga Way and Moraga Road meet will deserve, according to Clark, more community conversation. She believes that the Bruzzone family, which owns the majority of that land, does not agree with the zoning and the process the steering committee recommended. She was confronted with their vision that is more in line with what was developed in the past, and what the General Plan included when it was adopted: either single family homes or larger multifamily units. For Clark what is missing is the "in-between" style housing that would better fit Moraga's character while achieving similar density. She says that what has been proposed by the town is quite different in terms of scale and pattern, even prescribing how the streets would be laid out. These would be smaller-scale buildings, such as fourplexes or sixplexes. The challenge for Clark was to bridge the gap between the property owner's vision and what the town desires. She expected that the plan should have come back at the beginning of the 2018, but that because of the changes in personnel and gap in leadership, it might be delayed.

Clark regrets not seeing the new hillside and ridgeline regulations to completion, but she believes that the text is close to being finalized. She assumes that the council will finish the work in January. Here too there are possible difficulties with large property owners that have projects in hilly undeveloped land. One contentious issue was to decide whether a piece of land that was previously high risk but was remediated, should still be considered high risk ad infinitum. Clark noted that the final status of a piece of land is made at the time of the application, and that it would make sense to consider the state of the land at that moment, not what it was years before. The council was divided on that issue and has not yet made a decision. One development that could be partially impacted by the new rule is the Bollinger Canyon project that has been in the makings for 13 years. Clark anticipates this development project to reach the beginning of the public planning process next spring.

Clark said that the Palos Colorados project will be ready to break ground in the spring as well. It is a 123-home development planned to be built on 460 acres off Moraga Road, close to the border with Lafayette. The developer will pay the town a deposit of \$2.5 million following the Moraga Town Council approval of the final map. Another million dollars will be due within 120 days of the issuance of the grading permit. This is not the first time, however, that such a prediction has been made.

Besides these new projects and code changes, Clark said that Moraga's Municipal Code needs to be revisited. "Parts are outdated," she said, adding that it would be great to continue to make improvements, and that the town would benefit from the update of its design guidelines to align it with the look and feel most residents want.

She adds that the town has come to like its complicated and long process, partially due to the fact that the rules are not that clear. The consequence is that the process is painful, onerous and uncertain, and that it does not benefit anyone. Clark proposed to the council last year to update the regulations, but there have not been enough time and resources to get to that work.

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