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Interim town manager brings a wealth of experience to Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Jim Holgersson in his new Moraga office. Photo Sophie Braccini

There must be something left of his adventurous Swedish ancestors in Jim Holgersson's blood to explain the many adventures he lived as manager of cities in many states. From Texas to Michigan, from Illinois to California, Holgersson has lived the highs and the lows, the excitements and the challenges of the profession, keeping intact in his heart a desire for social improvement and building communities. In Moraga, he should have a few months to give the benefit of his years of experience to the town.

Holgersson started working in Moraga a month ago; although the office's doors were closed, he used the quiet time to get familiar with upcoming issues. He said a headhunter called him when he was on a cruise with his wife and he interviewed with the Moraga council via Skype. His first response had been "no," since he was enjoying retirement after leaving Modesto, his last city manager position, but he could not long resist the temptation of effecting change once again.

The interim manager says that he is a child of the '60s and as he was developing into adulthood there were many positive public figures that led him to believe that public service was the place to make a difference. He chose local government, where he felt that he could have

a measurable impact.

Holgersson was raised by parents who emigrated from Sweden. The family history is intricate, with grandparents coming to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century, a father who went back to Sweden after the Great Depression, and a Swedish mother who left her country at age 17, after World War II, on a boat with one hope: that her fiancé would be on the dock when she arrived.

The manager's first government job was with the city of Davenport, Iowa. Early on, his personality and talent led him toward community building to address social challenges. He remembers how in San Jose, as deputy city manager, he was in charge of creating neighborhood associations that led public-private partnerships to address the population's needs in terms of safety, employment and housing. Holgersson does not believe that the government can solve everything, but that it can be a catalyst to energize partners. From Waco, Texas, to Germantown, Tennessee, or Kalamazoo, Michigan, Holgersson tackled some tough city issues, moving on after five to eight years for a better opportunity or because of a change in elected officials.

Holgersson says that the job of the city manager is mostly outside of the office, meeting people. He has tackled much bigger problems than those in Moraga, and that gives him a calm perspective about the small California town.

Talking about the fiscal emergency that the town declared, he says that most cities grapple with similar issues and that a 50 percent reserve, such as what Moraga had, is an unattainable dream for most cities. The recommendation is 15 percent reserve, or about \$1.1 million for Moraga, something he believes is attainable. Holgersson would not comment about whether or not it had been a good idea to declare the financial emergency; the experienced manager is not someone to judge in haste and without the whole picture.

He knows that his time in Moraga is likely to be rather short; he does not want the permanent position, but he wants to use his experience to evaluate the town's organizational chart and may reassess some staffing needs. He was struck, however, by the thrifty state of the town that has low funding as well as one of the lowest cost and staffing per capita in California. For him saying that Moraga is not efficient is an opinion, not a diagnosis based on fact.

Holgersson says that seeking funding for the maintenance of the storm drains is the right thing to do. He adds that he has seen other cities very successfully use low-interest state stormwater loans to handle their drainage issues, and will support Moraga's attempt to do so.

He says he is looking forward to seeing the hillside and ridgeline regulations being finalized, the winery regulations being considered, and the emergence of new development projects. He believes that with the Moraga Center Specific Plan and its zoning regulation underway, Moraga is giving itself the opportunity to develop harmoniously and sustainably. Holgersson has also worked with many colleges and universities, and considers that uncovering more areas of common interest can foster the completion of new projects.

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