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An experienced planner to direct development in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Moraga's new Planning Director Derek Farmer
Photo Sophie Braccini

Derek Farmer was recently confirmed as Moraga planning director. The man, who was hired as senior planner a few years ago and promoted as interim director when Ellen Clark left, is now in charge. He has worked both in the public and private sectors, with universities, large cities, redevelopment projects and rowdy crowds, and is not fazed by the complex and often very lengthy Moraga processes; instead he is energized by what lies ahead.

Farmer is a San Diego native who got a job in the San Jose State media department after obtaining his bachelor's degree and decided to pursue a graduate degree there in urban planning. He says that land use, downtown redevelopment and the balance between development and environmental protection were the subjects that most interested him.

Farmer worked back and forth in the public and private sectors, about 11 years in each, in different parts of the country and the Bay Area. When he was a private consultant for the New York Government Office of Storm Recovery he was in charge of reconstruction projects in times of crisis when people had lost their homes to hurricanes, in areas built on increasingly flooding planes. He also worked on reconstruction projects for Navy bases.

Back in the Bay Area Farmer worked for the National Park Service on the upgrade of the Sausalito waste water treatment plant, a project that included archeological digs of sailors' remains that had been buried on the beaches during the Civil War period and World War I. Farmer also managed the Environmental Impact Report of UC Berkeley's future 5 million-square-foot Richmond global campus that will be built over the next 30 years. As a contractor he worked for the city of San Francisco on building transitional youth and affordable housing. He also worked on Lake Berryessa's shoreline trail management plan, creating a trail around the huge shoreline.

Farmer was first hired in Orinda in 2015. He had been working as a consultant for the city of Berkeley as a contract planner and wanted to return as a regular employee. He worked on projects at Wilder as a senior planner, and he also worked on Paul Ugenti's mixed development plan in downtown Orinda. Farmer decided to apply to Moraga when a senior position opened because he said that even if the cities are similar, there were aspects in Moraga he was particularly interested in.

One of them was the Saint Mary's College master plan. In addition to working with UC Berkeley, Farmer also worked with Stanford University as a Santa Clara County planner on the new student housing and academic and athletic buildings the university is planning. He is also interested in downtown redevelopment and is looking forward to working on the zoning of the Moraga Center Specific Plan.

Farmer looks at the coming projects in Moraga with a sense of calm, especially since Moraga hired a new senior planner, Steve Kowalski, who used to work in Fremont and has a lot of development experience, including working with hillside preservation regulation.

Farmer is already familiar with what is in the pipeline for Moraga. Some developments are far from completion, such as the Indian Valley project. This plan proposes building 71 homes on the vacant 450 acres bordering the community of Canyon, clustered on the lower flat portion of Indian Valley, over the ridge, overlooking Canyon and with access on Canyon Road. The EIR for this project has not yet been completed.

Closer to completion is the Bollinger Valley project. The property owner for that site has proposed another alternative, only 85 homes - more than 100 were previously contemplated. Farmer says that since it is a smaller project with a lesser impact, it is grandfathered with the EIR previously approved and will not be impacted by the new hillside and ridgeline regulation that was recently approved. The project should start the series of public hearings this year.

Farmer, who likes downtown development, is excited to see an in-fill development application coming in very soon for the empty lot next to the Rheem Theatre. He says that the site was studied by the planning commission four years ago, and adds that even if the town signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the owner, the project will not get any preferential treatment and will have to stand on its own.

A few other things Farmer is excited about are the application for a microbrewery that should come in front of the planning commission in the early summer and a Lamorinda bike/scooter-sharing program that will also include the college.

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