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Town approves Hacienda lease agreement with La Finestra owner

By Sophie Braccini

The foretold opening of a new La Finestra at the Hacienda de las Flores has garnered large support of elected officials, staff, and residents alike. At its May 23 meeting the Moraga Town Council approved a five-year lease agreement with two five-year renewal options. Due to previously booked events, the new restaurant will not open until Dec. 1 of this year.

Moraga Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg stated that the town's first objective with this agreement was to activate the public park. The Hacienda de las Flores is a 9-acre public property that includes the main mansion, the Casita and La Sala that are smaller one-level structures, and large grounds where the Pavilion is located, another elegant architectural piece where wedding ceremonies are often held. With the main past activity being weddings, the public space was often closed to the public on weekends, and only a few recreation classes were held during the week. The manager views the private-public partnership as a way to increase public interaction with the space.

Council Member Kymberleigh Korpus wanted to know if Battenberg was qualified to negotiate that lease. Battenberg talked about her past experience with the city of San Leandro where she negotiated several such agreements with restaurants. She added that she had also asked Main Street Properties founder Craig Semmelmeier to compare the Hacienda lease terms with what is done in Lamorinda and got a positive opinion from the experienced commercial real estate professional. Resident Barry Behr said that he had questions about the lease that the town manager answered. He added that he asked several professionals in the same field about the lease terms and was told that the lease was a fair deal for the town and the restaurant.

Besides the rent, La Finestra will pay to the town 5 percent of net restaurant sales above \$100,000 and 10 percent of the net sales from catering events. La Finestra will be the sole preferred caterer of events held on the property.

Parks and Recreation Director Breyana Brent indicated that of the 75 events, which are mostly weddings hosted on the property, most could be moved to the Pavilion. The town would lose revenue from about 10 events a year. The projections made by her department show a net increase in revenue for the town of about \$86,000 that will reduce the current \$252,000 annual cost of the park for the town.

Moraga has agreed to give Assadi a tenant improvement allowance of \$60,000, an amount that all parties agreed is below what is usually required of property owners. Assadi will invest in the Hacienda, most notably to update the kitchen to commercial and regulatory standards.

Battenberg also listed investments that would be needed to reposition the Hacienda: upgrade the Casita to be able to hold classes there, improve the parking lot, add way finding signs and a gas insert in the Pavilion fireplace for charm effect. The total was estimated at \$181,000.

Hollie Lucas-Alcalay, president of the Hacienda Foundation, indicated after the meeting that the group was aware of the situation and had discussed supporting some of these projects. She said that the foundation considered the upgrades to be in line with its mission statement and that her group had discussed the Casita and Pavilion projects. The Hacienda Foundation draws revenues from private donations as well as events held at the Hacienda.

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