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Moraga Town Council candidates square off on complex local issues Curated

By Nick Marnell



Mike McCluer Dave Trotter Photo provided Steve Woehleke

Incumbent Dave Trotter and challengers Mike McCluer and Steve Woehleke, all vying for two open seats on the Moraga Town Council, discussed various local topics with the Lamorinda Weekly.

Lamorinda Weekly: The 2018-19 budget does not include funding to address needed repairs or to replace assets such as major equipment or facilities. In addition, Moraga does not have enough revenue to address infrastructure needs. According to the town's budget document, "Due to the town's small budget and ongoing lack of sufficient investment in its infrastructure, the town could be one emergency away from another cash flow problem." Yet residents expect the infrastructure to be repaired and maintained. How do you propose to accomplish that, without enough money available to do it?

Candidates: Using over-budget Measure K funds is the method McCluer favors to repair infrastructure. He will also aim to fill empty storefronts and investigate cost savings of reorganizing town departments, including outsourcing and pursuing shared service agreements.

Trotter said that the town will strive to obtain public grants and reimbursements to help cover infrastructure projects. He said that the storm drain project, crucial to the town's infrastructure, is not going away. "I have proposed at council meetings that the town track property tax receipts during the course of the year, and at the midyear budget (revision) apply 50 percent of the anticipated overage to storm drain repairs and maintenance," Trotter said.

Woehleke will minimize infrastructure maintenance and renewal costs through use of sound business practices. He would also fine-tune the town finances and sell nonessential, nonperforming assets to raise funds. Only as a last resort would he seek approval of additional funding from Moraga citizens.

Lamorinda Weekly: Even with property tax revenue forecast to increase 5 percent a year, the town's five-year financial plan projects that the town will not have hit its council goal of a 50 percent general fund reserve by 2023. As such, together with the problem outlined in the previous question, would you say that Moraga has a revenue problem or a spending problem? Can you give examples of what you would propose to achieve a healthier town bottom line?

Candidates: Trotter insists that the town has a revenue problem, not a spending problem, largely due to its low share of property tax receipts. He does, however, advocate for less spending, noting that he voted against the community meeting room and the studies on proposed St. Mary's Road roundabouts. And he said that obtaining grants and reimbursements will help the town's bottom line.

"Moraga may have both revenue and spending problems," Woehleke said. To improve fiscal health via the spending side, he will "strive to ensure that major expenditures are optimized including through use of proven business practices." On the revenue side, he advocates continuing to work in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce to encourage new businesses.

"In my opinion we do have opportunities to cut expenses," McCluer said. He would build revenue through an aggressive support of new retail in Moraga by expediting the permitting process and creating a welcoming climate for new businesses.

Lamorinda Weekly: What is your stance on the recent hillside development and ridgeline protection policy? How is it fair to property owners, environmentalists and the no-growth faction alike? And, considering the financial challenges presented in earlier questions, why is the policy worth a quarter of a million dollars in legal costs to defend?

Candidates: "I choose not to judge fairness, as the new regulations are being litigated," Woehleke said. He does not believe that the Moraga community seeks litigation except as a last resort and he is concerned that for a fiscally challenged small town like Moraga, the litigation costs will be a burden.

McCluer said there is a very strong consensus from Moraga residents that these guidelines are appropriate and necessary to better protect ridgelines, scenic views and hillsides. Regarding litigation, he said the town's

duty is to serve the interests of its residents and when necessary use funds to defend what the residents have clearly indicated they want.

"I strongly support the recent adoption of the new hillside, ridgeline and open space protections policies that are now embodied in amendments to the town's General Plan, zoning ordinances and design guidelines," Trotter said. He calls the regulations balanced, and says they fairly accommodate competing interests and do not preclude all development. "Defending the town's land use and zoning regulations against unjustified attacks is both essential and in the public interest," he said.

Lamorinda Weekly: Moraga retail will suffer a major blow in 2019 with the departure of Orchard Supply Hardware. It sometimes seems as if, in retail, for every two steps the town moves ahead, it slips back one and a half, and storefronts continue to sit vacant. How do you propose to help Moraga attract - and retain - a vibrant retail sector?

Candidates: According to McCluer, one underlying problem in attracting new retail is that Moraga has one of the most difficult approval processes in the East Bay. "The town has made good progress to date in trying to change that, but we need more and this is a central goal of mine," he said.

Trotter said he has worked to develop a new zoning ordinance which promises to streamline the ongoing efforts to enhance the retail opportunities and refurbish the Rheem Center, and he said that zoning designation is available to all shopping center owners. Implementation of the Moraga Center Specific Plan remains his high priority, and Trotter said that the preserved Rheem Theatre will act as a magnet, drawing patrons to nearby restaurants and businesses.

To enhance the commercial districts, Woehleke looks to assign each new potential business a council member advocate, revise Moraga's planning process to better match current conditions and become a council liaison to the Chamber. "We cannot succeed without cooperation of the major property and business owners, and acrimonious relationships need to be resolved," he said.

Lamorinda Weekly: At the May 23 council meeting, a speaker commented that a large part of the No vote against the proposed Moraga storm drain fee had "nothing to do with stormwater" but with "people's vitriol against (the town) council, and what is happening and what has happened in the past." The speaker called for the council to "improve on transparency and decision making." What steps would you take to increase council transparency and to improve its decision making?

Candidates: "The council meets and makes its decisions in public with cameras rolling," Trotter said. He explained that the town has taken many steps to better communicate with Moraga residents about what is going on, including the About Town e-newsletter and live streaming of all council meetings. "The unsuccessful storm drain measure shows we must do a better job engaging in very transparent outreach to the community before moving forward with any new funding proposal," Trotter said.

Woehleke believes that transparency is a key factor in quality decision making. "The town council is your team. Every successful team has a mix of individuals who bring unique strengths to maximize the positive outcomes. I can and will make a significant positive difference on the functioning of the council by building this critical competency," he said.

"I share the speaker's concerns, and addressing the storm drain infrastructure problem and improving transparency are among my highest priorities," McCluer said. "Full, complete, and easily accessible information should be available to the public regarding all major decisions and expenditures. I feel that the recent declaration of a financial emergency and drafting of the storm drain fee measure should have included more effective and open communication with the public."

Summary

The three candidates shared many similar elements of their vision of Moraga four years from now, such as an improved financial position, dedicated infrastructure funding, open space preservation and a stronger retail market. But each candidate also presented one unique suggestion in his long-range outlook.

McCluer was the only candidate who promised to address the town's unfunded pension liability, Trotter envisions completion and active use of a new public trail network on Palos Colorados, Bellavista, and Painted Rock properties and Woehleke foresees a long-range Lamorinda traffic management plan - even using autonomous buses - to account for the growing population of all three communities.

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