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Consolidation of Design Review Board and Planning Commission in the works

By Vera Kochan

During the Feb. 27 Moraga Town Council meeting, Planning Director Derek Farmer put forth a consideration by council members to consolidate the Design Review Board with the Planning Commission.

Farmer cited the benefits to the town in that the move would reduce staff time and costs, as well as enable Moraga to provide applicants with a streamlined planning review process.

The Design Review Board's main functions are to review architecture and landscaping, while the Planning Commission handles land use elements. Farmer noted a decline in the number of persons interested in sitting on the DRB. In 2017, there were nine DRB meetings mostly regarding one major item and a few more were only for additions to a single family home. In 2018, several members of the DRB moved over to the Planning Commission, and their vacated positions were never filled. Farmer has encouraged residents who are interested to fill those positions, but to no avail. The DRB needs a quorum to operate and it currently doesn't have one.

Farmer feels that the consolidation would benefit developers and applicants by saving them time and money. They wouldn't have to go back and forth between departments in order to get a permit. He stated, "We are a cost recovery department, and we bill staff time to the applicant."

According to Farmer, the state of California doesn't require municipalities to have a DRB the way it does a planning commission. Orinda has already consolidated theirs and Lafayette is watching Moraga's process before deciding what route to take.

Members of the DRB agree that the consolidation is a good idea, and the level of additional work for members of the Planning Commission would be minimal. "It's not going to be a culture shock. These people (DRB members) know the town." Farmer adds, "And, because we don't have a DRB quorum this would be a good time to consider consolidating the DRB with the Planning Commission."

Moraga Chamber of Commerce President Bob Fritzky agreed with the recommendation, saying it would make doing business with Moraga that much more attractive to potential developers.

The consolidation would cost the town \$12,000 - \$15,000 in legal fees to document. Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg noted, "We do have a budget for town attorney costs, so that would fit in with our budget. It wouldn't be additional legal fees."

The town council unanimously agreed to allow paperwork for the consolidation process to begin.

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