



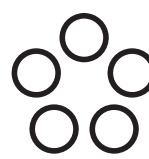
MORAGA

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MCSP Town Hall takes a new turn regarding public comments

By Vera Kochan

Up until now, any public comments regarding the Moraga Center Specific Plan Implementation Project predominantly revolved around safe and efficient evacuation in the event of an emergency. With a potential increase of 630 dwellings in the Moraga Center area, the distinct possibility for that many additional vehicles trying to vacate the town creates a chaotic mental scenario to a situation that hasn't even arrived yet.

Staff planned on holding two Town Hall meetings. The first one was to have taken place on Sept. 1 at the Hacienda de las Flores as an in-person event, but limited to 100 attendees in order to comply with coronavirus county health mandates. However, it was canceled as a safety precaution.

The second meeting was conducted via Zoom on Sept. 2 with approximately 30 viewers in attendance.

On hand to answer the public's questions regarding fire, evacuation safety and housing laws were Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker, Moraga Police Chief Jon King and Assistant Town Attorney Karen Murphy. However, after briefly touching on those topics, the public's comments and questions began to gravitate around the MCSP's viability given the fact that it was adopted 10 years ago and in a different economic climate than today's.

Historically, the vision for a high-density, mixed-use town center was defined in the Moraga General Plan adopted in 2002 after a three-year public process. Work on the MCSP began in 2003 to be followed by

seven years of public input and analysis resulting in the adoption of the 2010 Moraga Center Specific Plan.

One resident was concerned about empty storefronts, because many people have taken to shop online – a pattern that was magnified by the COVID-19 shelter-in-place mandates. Planning Director Afshan Hamid explained that the MCSP's mixed-use office/retail allows for a variety of businesses that are not reliant on online sales. Even limited-sized schools could be a possible tenant.

Another question concerned updating any differences from 2010 to present-day standards, to which Murphy replied, "The zoning updates will bring the project up to 2020 standards."

There was a suggestion to put the MCSP issue on a ballot

and let residents decide whether to proceed with its implementation.

A concern arose as to whether the public's views or comments, in actuality, carry any weight against the property owner's vision for the development. Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg responded, "We are trying to implement the Plan to where everyone is pleased."

There was also a question about MCSP addressing affordable housing needs, to which it was pointed out that the Plan allows for senior and workforce housing.

Several residents questioned whether the MCSP could be amended to the current concerns of the town. The answer was "no." Amending the MCSP falls out of the scope of the Implementation Project. Any amendment of the Plan

would have to be implemented through a separate project.

Aesthetically, what held true in 2010 can still be applied to 2020's standards upheld by the MCSP. The Plan calls for an economically viable and environmentally sensitive approach to development while creating a mixed-use village with local-serving commercial development and a range of residential opportunities. This also takes into consideration the revitalization of the existing Moraga Shopping Center and the Moraga Ranch complex, along with the preservation of the creek corridor. While the Plan doesn't authorize immediate construction, it is considered to be an important step toward the future development potential to the area and an influx of tax dollars into the local economy.

Town council candidates respond to Moraga's interests now and for the future



Kendall Langan



Teresa Onoda



Ursula Schilling



Renata Sos



David Stromberg

By Vera Kochan

Of the 13 goals listed in last year's "Town Council and Community Goals for 2020 – Building for the Future," most have either been accomplished or are in the process – quite a

feat considering what Moraga has gone through economically in recent years. With the Moraga Center Specific Plan, retail expansion and residential development being top of mind recently, the five candidates seeking to fill three

positions on the town council were asked to respond to issues most often raised during MCSP discussions, meetings or town halls.

In alphabetical order, the five candidates are: Kendall Langan, Teresa Onoda, Ursula Schilling, Renata Sos (incumbent) and David Stromberg.

Lamorinda Weekly: One of the town council goals for 2020 was to enhance Moraga's business environment and work collaboratively with the Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders, yet several stand-alone storefronts have remained empty for years, especially in the Moraga Shopping Center. Granted, COVID-19 has currently stymied any productive business environment, but what can the town do post-pandemic to fill the vacancies and prevent them in the future?

Candidates: Stromberg noted that as chair of the planning commission he supported merging the design review board with the commission in order to streamline the planning department's approval of applications; voted for signage upgrades to the Rheem Shopping Center; and promoted new municipal codes to attract a wide variety of businesses.

Sos discussed the Small Business Relief Program, recently approved by the town council, which offers to reimburse businesses up to \$2,000 in COVID-related expenses; as well as the town's efforts to simplify local regulations to promote and maintain businesses in Moraga. She stressed the importance of the community shopping

locally when purchasing goods and services.

Onoda has met with both Moraga Center and Rheem Center's property owners to discuss ways to enhance their properties to make them more attractive to shoppers and include the Chamber in the discussions; she has given new businesses ideas to become more successful; and worked with Art in Public Spaces to put sculptures in key areas around town to add attractive notes to the retail districts.

Onoda and Langan both agree with the importance of using social media to promote the town. Langan suggested a "Shop Moraga" campaign with the Chamber taking the lead in addition to promoting Moraga's office spaces as an alternative to "high priced office spaces in Orinda, Lafayette and Walnut Creek: More businesses, more shoppers."

Both Langan and Schilling made note of the abundance of parking available. Schilling added, "Building on what seems to thrive in our two shopping centers, Safeway, TJ Maxx, Home Goods, Ace Hardware, Moraga Liquors among many successful businesses, and a very popular Sunday Farmers' Market." She'd like to promote Moraga as a place to dine and shop.

Lamorinda Weekly: The MCSP will bring many changes, not only to the Center area proper, but to the town as a whole. Are there any aspects of the MCSP that you personally have issues with; and if you could go back in time to 2010 during MCSP's inception what would you change?

Candidates: Sos emphasized the importance for everyone to understand that the MCSP merely "provides clarity to both property owners and public officials as to what is

allowed to be built." As a current town council member about to consider proposed zoning codes she cannot express her personal views, but if there was anything in the process she would change it would be for the zoning to have been completed much closer to 2010.

Onoda conceded that more housing would lead to revenue growth. "On the other hand, housing will increase traffic, which would become even more problematic if a fire ever forces people to flee en masse." Besides additional commuter traffic, Onoda is concerned about protecting the ridgeline views and the detracting aesthetics of new housing.

Langan felt that MCSP preserves open space by concentrating development in the Moraga Center area while being situated on regional trails. While he feels that the Plan has flaws, Senate Bill 330 is requiring Moraga to grow. Schilling feels that MCSP needs more common ground and consensus building.

Stromberg has worked on the MCSP since 2015, and while he looks forward to affordable and senior housing adjacent to a mixed-use development, he felt that a "Build It Green Single-Family GreenPoint Checklist" should be mandatory rather than discretionary. "I would have preferred stricter building height limits and larger setbacks, design concepts that are more consistent with Moraga's semi-rural feel." Additionally, he wanted a mandatory pedestrian/bicycle trail along one side of the Laguna Creek and greater protection for Moraga's orchards.

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