

Letters to the editor

The cost of service

I disagree with the statement "MOFD Fire Flow Tax quantifies the risk of fire to a parcel" in the article about the MOFD board considering a possible fire flow tax rate hike.

The formula for the Moraga tax was an attempt, back in 1992, to allocate additional revenue (above the funds provided by regular property taxes) needed to provide premium service to the residents of the Moraga Fire Protection District (MFPD). It was called a "fire flow tax" but since MFPD did not provide the "flow" (water) to put out fires, it did not really cost MFPD anything extra to put out a little fire or a big fire. What MFPD provided was the equipment and man-power; fixed costs.

They had two stations, two fire engines, and if they needed mutual aid to put out a big fire, adjacent stations provided that aid for no cost.

The same is true today.

MOFD today receives most of its revenue, \$29.3 million, from property taxes. Most of that is used for employee salaries and benefits and most of that to the three shifts of 17 firefighters and the administration required to supervise and support them.

Eight of those 17 firefighters (47% of the total) are stationed in and serve Moraga and Canyon whose population (18,000) is about 47% of the total 38,000 served by MOFD.

While MOFD does not allocate its costs between Orinda and Moraga, it is not unreasonable to assume that the cost to provide service to Moraga is 47% of the \$29.3 million in property tax revenue;

which equates to \$13.8 million. This is what it costs to provide Moraga with the premium service it desires.

However, regular tax from Moraga and Canyon property owners to MOFD only adds up to \$9.6 million; \$4 million short of what it costs to serve them. The current parcel tax only adds another \$500,000. Even if the parcel tax was increased five times to \$2.5 million, what Moragas voted on in 1992, it would still be \$1.5 million short.

Moraga should not complain about paying what it costs to service them.

Steve Cohn
Orinda

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'Our light is on' – Visitors welcome to the Lafayette Historical Society

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"We didn't have much space prior to this. ... The picture files were in the old library," Kikkert said. "Otherwise most of the material would be in people's garages and attics. There was no central space where we could put them and where people could view them."

The Lafayette Historical Society is definitely a place of interactive learning; people who wander through its doors interact intimately with the volunteers. It is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization in operation since 1973. "Originally there was a historical committee which was related to the library," said Flood.

This description on its website describes the society's aims perfectly: "We believe in the power of history

to ignite the imagination, stimulate thought and provide enjoyment. Through our collections and programs we strive to link Lafayette's history to the lives of people."

"We are sort of a hidden gem; we do not get a lot of traffic," said Kikkert, who showed this reporter their visitors log, which included a couple names over the last several months – and then a yearlong gap.

Volunteer Sande Hubbs explained to me how the pandemic affected their volunteer staff: "We used to all be here at the same time but of course with ... COVID we closed completely and then when we reopened it was just in small groups."

In most instances, visitors to the center are curious about the history of their own property, and they are shown

aerial photographs of their land in years past, maps of the town over the years, et cetera.

Less trodden are the oral histories, transcripts of the society's interviews with characters from the city. Many of these oral histories are now available on the society's website, but the content is most special when read where the volunteers can add anecdotes and direction.

The archives and materials kept in this space are brought to life by its loyal volunteers who are interested in sharing their findings with others.

"It is wonderful to be a part of Lafayette and its history," Kikkert said, "and it's fun to help people who share that same interest."

Council approves Samantha Townhomes construction

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Hearing descriptions of parking shortages and concerns from both parties about cars backing out of driveways, especially the driveways of three units located closest to the school, Mayor Susan Candell asked Attorney Bryan Wenter to explain why eliminating those units did not fall under the council's purview.

Wenter explained the project meets the legal requirements of Density Bonus law and the Housing Accountability Act that "mimic each other in terms of the discretion that is curtailed at a state level in connection with projects that benefit from the protection of those laws."

Wenter said the HAA prevents a public agency (in this case, the city council) from limiting or altering the proposed project because the development meets all zoning requirements and there are no proven public health and safety violations. Other than speculation from the appellants about the negative impact the townhouses would or would not have, he said there are no violations of written criteria establishing public health and safety standards.

He confirmed that the city could be sued by the applicant if they tried to eliminate the end units. He noted that the area had been studied previously and is located where housing has been planned for and sought by the city.

The Whiteheads reiterated concerns about the safety of children attending

the school, highlighted the area's limited parking and the likelihood of increased traffic congestion on Stuart Street.

Speaking for applicant/owners Samuel Bing and Linda Lai Lee, representative Stuart Rickard showed a photograph of Stuart Street as it currently exists. He said the end of the street had been striped for parking. The elimination of those five striped parking spots – a contentious subject that received considerable attention during the meeting – would increase public safety. He also suggested the townhomes' one-car garages could have auditory opening signals that would add to public safety and awareness.

Minus the parked vehicles, Rickard said there would be more room for emergency vehicles to access the area and less multi-point turnarounds made by people bringing their children to the school. "The sidewalk we will be adding will also contribute to the overall safety of pedestrians," said Rickard.

During public comments, a parent of a child enrolled at The Child Day Schools said he was concerned the project was making the area more dangerous. He said developing the land with "a cavalier attitude" left him worried about the construction phase and the increased traffic congestion on an already challenging street. He encouraged council to consider some kind of compromise to mitigate the concerns.

Rickard said he is "a big supporter of the public process because it brings out the issues and allows us to debate them in public." He

said an idea proposed during the discussions to have a traffic engineer look at the situation is a good one. "Our project will improve the situation but it probably needs someone who's an expert to help develop some structure around it." He emphasized the applicant is "not cavalier in any way" when it comes to safety.

Because the city must consider and either approve or deny this type of project at one of five hearings – the council meeting July 26 was the fifth public hearing for the project – a decision was required of the council.

Council discussion led to amendments to the Resolution and Conditions of Approval, most relating to ensuring the updated plans and other future information submitted by the applicant includes 220V EV-ready hookups in each garage, a mention in homeowners association agreements of the proper use and maintenance of MERV filters, and limiting construction hours to 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday to Saturday. No construction will be permitted on Sundays or holidays.

It was agreed that staff will direct the public works manager and the city's traffic engineer to consult with the applicant and appellant and make recommendations to the council regarding a possible traffic study.

After voting unanimously to approve the revised articles of Resolution and Conditions of Approval, the council agreed to discuss reductions in the appellant's \$12,637 fee to appeal the decision at the next council meeting.

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