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Moraga Town Council performs their version of Musical Chairs

By Vera Kochan

Moraga Mayor Renata Sos called a Special Meeting of the town council on Jan. 5 that was open to the public via Zoom, in order to discuss December's mayor and vice mayor selections. The move was prompted by Sos in order to continue her hopes that the council could set aside their differences and "move forward" for the good of the community - a common theme of the evening.

"I felt that recent events warranted having this council get together to address thoughtfully, but in short order, an issue that appears to be driving a deep wedge in our community," began Sos. "We have tonight an opportunity to discuss how to start a healing process. My hope for this evening is that this council will take steps to help bridge the divide in a way that will allow this council and this town to credibly and effectively get on with the business of serving our community and tackling the many issues that will come before us in 2022." Sos also mentioned that the town seems to be split down the middle regarding last month's mayor and vice mayoral seating results.

Sos stated that Council Member Steve Woehleke had approached her regarding a possible alternative to the outcome and maybe a solution to the discord. Woehleke's scenario would allow for Sos to serve as mayor for the first half of 2022 with himself continuing as vice mayor; then mid-year the roles would reverse with Woehleke as mayor and Sos as vice mayor.

Woehleke regretted putting the new vice mayor, Sona Makker, in the position of having to vacate her seat, and admitted that he shouldn't have nominated her to begin with, given her short tenure on the council. If Woehleke's proposed scenario met with council agreement, the Jan. 12 Regular Town Council Meeting would see Sos continuing in her mayoral role with Woehleke serving as vice mayor (both pledging to work collaboratively) until no later than May 25 - the midway point of council meetings - when the roles would be reversed.

Makker requested an opportunity in the future for council to receive and examine any feedback made regarding the new situation as to whether it's working, and if not, how to adjust it.

During the Public Comment portion of the Jan. 5 meeting, the handful of comments that were forthcoming was divided down the middle.

Woehleke's explanation of the proposal "continues Moraga's tradition of appropriately progressing the vice mayor position to mayor position, and traditionally the vice mayor is the vice mayor in preparation for becoming the mayor. Avoiding switching immediately has several advantages. It allows us a cool-down period to work things out organizationally; it avoids potential rework by staff for the 2022 planning that has already begun; it also enables making a seamless transition between the mayor and the vice mayor at the appropriate time; and it allows for a logical progression of Renata to mayor for the year 2023."

"I am supporting this," stated Makker. "I do not take any issue with the fact that the vice mayor title is irrelevant to me. It is irrelevant to my commitment to being a volunteer on the council, so I'm okay with the piece that refers to the vice mayor being switched."

Before agreeing to the new scenario Council Member Teresa Onoda wanted some assurances. "I'm hoping that this coming year we do not have any more disruptor-in-chiefs in this council, and that we all work together and not try to stir up the town with things that are not true," she said.

"We all love this town," Onoda continued. "We want to do the best that we can for this town and for the town people; and we are volunteers." She expressed the desire that all council members treat each other with respect. "I hope that everyone else will reflect and see how we can move this year - 2022 - in a new direction, thanks to Steve. So, I am for this, but I wanted to make it very clear, what I've seen in the past and what I do not want to see in the future."

No town council action was taken on Jan. 5, because the topic was not properly agendaized, but staff listed it as a consent item on the Jan. 12 council meeting agenda where there was an opportunity to pull it for further discussion. The item was approved and Sos officially retained her mayoral position, with Woehleke officially continuing as vice mayor through, at the very latest, May 25 (at which point the roles will be reversed to the end of the year). Makker's title reverts back to council member.

Woehleke is no stranger to volunteering his services to Moraga. A career with Chevron helped steer him into leadership assignments involving decision-making and facilitating skills for operating organizations worldwide. As such, he often served as either chair or president while volunteering over six years on the town's Design Review Board, 10 years on the Planning Commission, five years with the Hacienda Foundation board of directors, and as an active member of Kiwanis Club of Moraga Valley.

With regards to the newly adopted scenario, Woehleke replied, "I'm confident that the Moraga Town Council will be successful with this organization. Renata and I have demonstrated our ability to work together for the benefit of Moraga's citizens. We are committed to continuing our positive working relationship, and I believe all the of town council are committed to success."

Woehleke stated that community feedback regarding the new arrangement has been "almost consistently very positive. (The) general message is that the compromise deals with the reality as it is, and allows the town to move forward."

Giving kudos to Makker for stepping aside as vice mayor, Woehleke added, "Credit for acceptance of the compromise should go to Renata. She embraced the compromise and visibly endorsed it. The town council will be able to support the town consistent with our responsibilities. This is the driver for the compromise, for both Renata and me."

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