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Town staff's analysis of Moraga helps to guide council's 2022 goals and priorities

By Vera Kochan



One of the town's challenges in the coming year is funding infrastructure projects. Photo Storm Drain Master Plan

Department heads on the town staff came together to create a report to the town council discussing Moraga's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. With a cumulative 182 years of experience working for over 20 municipal agencies, not to mention at least 75,000 hours for Moraga, the town's executive directors are more than qualified for the task. The purpose of the analysis was to give council members a better understanding of the status quo prior to formulating a Town Council 2022 Goals and Priorities list.

During an informative Jan. 12 slide presentation by Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg, the topics for discussion ran the gamut from the good news to the bad. Starting with the good news, as anyone knows who lives here, Moraga's schools are powerhouses when it comes to education; the parks, open spaces and recreational programs have much to offer; its residents are extremely educated with high average household incomes; Moraga ranks in the top 13% of the state's low

financial risk; there's a stable revenue base; accurate and transparent financial record keeping; low-cost police services and low crime rate; a town attorney with 30 years of town experience; various community organizations and volunteers; a dedicated town staff geared toward customer service; and a creative and collaborative executive team.

Determined as the town's weaknesses are that Moraga has only a 5.3% share of property tax revenue (the lowest in the county); a minimal staff handles increasing workloads which leads to employee burnout and a low capacity for special projects; continual loss of institutional knowledge from employee exits; an Unfunded Pension Liability due to past deferrals and CalPERS losses; absence of many infrastructure grant funds due to insufficient public transit, strong demographics and being in a high resourced area; aging infrastructure (storm drains, etc.); and inadequate evacuation routes.

There are dozens of opportunities that the town can take advantage of such as the \$4.2 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds available to repair and maintain the storm drains; development of Palos Colorados and Town-wide Recreation and Open Space Plan; increase community engagement; Advanced Planning Initiative Phase II funding; increase collaboration on land use issues; increase the use of technology for greater efficiency and transparency; refinance 2013 Certificates of Participation in April 2023; continue to evaluate insourcing/outsourcing; increase efficiency of town council meetings; succession planning; step up relationship with Saint Mary's College; conduct labor negotiations and update Personnel Rules; improve broadband connection and replace Virtual Private Network (VPN) with a cloud-based system; implement Facility Generation and Energy Efficiency Study recommendations; and consider future allocation of Measure K, General Fund revenue to unfunded infrastructure needs.

Now for the bad news. Moraga has an aging infrastructure and an increase in cost and scope of fire abatement; the unfunded legislative mandates have made significant impacts on the cost and method of service delivery across all departments; increasing competition from outside agencies makes it difficult to attract or retain qualified employees; inflation is taking its toll on the cost of goods and services; the volatility of CalPERS returns and changing economic and political conditions; an increase in issue resolution through legal actions; a highly politicized development environment; the increase in state mandates results in loss of local control with regards to development and land use; and the enormous amount of misinformation regarding town business via unofficial channels.

Town staff has some recommendations for the council's 2022 goals. High on the list is to develop Palos Colorados and the Town-wide Recreation and Open Space Plan. The town recently received a \$2.25 million payment from the Palos Colorados developer. Possible use of the funds could include park and open space improvements; improve the nearby trail system; construct projects and improvements within the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, the Moraga Commons Park Site Specific Master Plan, and the Hacienda de las Flores Conceptual Feasibility Study. The funds could also be used to maintain Mullholland Ridge and contribute to the acquisition of more open space with an eye toward development impact fees. The council has also discussed using some of the funds to cover the unfunded pension liability and other unfunded infrastructural needs. Additionally, the use of the \$4.2 million ARPA funds available for revenue loss and repair/maintenance of the storm drain system must be determined.

Another recommendation is to increase public outreach and community engagement. Currently the town has several ways to communicate information to the public via the About Town newsletter, NextDoor, Facebook, Instagram and Nixle. By adding additional public outreach it is hoped that the amount of unofficial misinformation regarding town business will decrease.

Advanced Planning Initiative funding to complete the Bollinger Valley Rezone Phase I and update the town's General Plan needs an additional \$169,000 for Fiscal Year 2022-23. Phase II funding needs \$314,000 for FY 2023-24 and FY 2024-25.

Staff recommends the refinancing of 2013 Certificates of Participation at a lower rate in April 2023. The COPS were for street and storm drain improvements after the passage of Measure K when the town leveraged the local sales tax revenue and issued \$7.72 million.

Staff suggested implementing funding of a Facility Generation and Energy Efficiency Study (which was included in the FY 2021-22 Adopted Budget). Based on the results, funding for capital projects could be included in the FY 2022-23 Budget.

Lastly, staff determined that all Measure K revenue will most likely need to be allocated to the 2022-23 Worst-First Pavement Reconstruction project and carried over into FY 2023-24.

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