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# Moraga Chamber of Commerce looks to revitalize the town's business climate

By Vera Kochan

Two years ago, COVID-19 and its fallout, took a hard toll on every community's business sector. Moraga was not immune. The lack of new retail offerings in town still reflects the uneasy atmosphere in a world of yo-yoing government mandates and regulations.

On the cusp of 2022, the Moraga Chamber of Commerce is hoping to get back on track to pre-COVID times by going full speed ahead with a game plan to boost established businesses and attract new ones to the area. Loss of business meant loss of Chamber membership as business owners needed to prioritize expenses. With that in mind, the Chamber held workshops and took meetings with local political leaders to help its members navigate the waters of uncertainty and maintain a feeling of connectivity.

Newly elected Chamber President Gian (John) Panetta, a financial service professional, has been a Chamber member for nearly two years. "I saw this as an opportunity to give back and put my contribution stamp on the town." He has also served on a state government level by interning with Congressmen Mark DeSaulnier and Eric Swalwell.

The Chamber conducted a survey among its members in order to get an idea of Moraga's current business climate and concerns. "The vast majority of survey respondents were not aware of federal funding nor were they aware of the limitations of how those funds can be used," Panetta stated. Others did take advantage of various relief programs.

A mere 20% said that they suffered no negative impacts from COVID; 64% incurred financial loss; and 36% found it difficult to hire or retain staff. A majority of businesses lost between 10-50% of annual revenue, while 2% said they lost 90-100%. At least 69% feel

they are still challenged due to COVID. Almost all businesses would like to increase benefits to staff; many feel they could use a cash infusion from \$1,000-\$60,000 with the majority needing \$20,000-\$40,000.

Other requests on the survey include more public events; help with business marketing and networking resources; technical seminars; and assistance with applying for aid.

The Chamber has a newly designed, user-friendly website (www.moragachamber.org). "We would like to see the Chamber page become a significant resource for businesses and the community," said Panetta. "We feel that a 'Help Wanted' and well-managed 'Calendar of Events' pages will help to build that resource."

It is hoped that before long many Chamber-sponsored events will once again be held within town limits. Business of the Year, Job Fair/Summer Jobs Faire, the golf tournament at Moraga Country Club and Community Faire are on the list once mandates allow.

The Chamber is also hoping to continue its involvement with Saint Mary's College by continuing the Small Business Catalyst Program among others.

On the horizon, to increase patronage within town, is a "Shop Local" benefits program – considered a win-win for shoppers and shop-keepers. Moraga's chamber has contacted various chamber organizations to see how they have handled this type of program for maximum results.

When asked whether the Chamber can influence both shopping center property owners to revitalize the appearance of those areas, Panetta replied, "The property owners, of course, need to operate within the reality of their own economic circumstances, but I do believe they value the input and engagement of the Chamber in

helping make their centers conducive to new business."

The town itself is striving to become more involved with the local business climate. "The Moraga Chamber of Commerce has made a request to the town of Moraga during their goals setting meeting for funds to support local business and the Chamber," explained Panetta. "The Chamber made a minimum ask for what we hope will be a substantial impact for our community. We look forward to the town's response." Streamlining the conditional use permit process and recent

new sign ordinances have been a step in the right direction to make Moraga more business friendly.

The Chamber is hoping that local businesses who are not members decide to become one, given all of the positive changes happening going forward. Some of the perks of membership include: a liaison with the town council and SMC; free educational forums and workshops; networking with other businesses; marketing advantages through the chamber's online presence; business promotion from the chamber's booth at

town events; participation in Business of the Year award; and participation in all promotion pieces.

The Chamber also welcomes new board members, and anyone who would like to fill out the still on-going survey can find the link on the Chamber's website. For additional information email: MoragaChamber925@gmail.com. A new phone line is in the works, and at this point in time, Katie Bidstrup is currently serving as the Interim Executive Director.

# Tragic events unfold over weekend in quiet Moraga neighborhood

By Vera Kochan

The Moraga Police Department responded to a disturbance at 11:45 a.m. Feb. 12 on the 300 block of Birchwood Drive after neighbors reported hearing a woman screaming for help.

According to interim MPD Chief Jon King, officers had arrived to discover that a man in his 50s had assaulted his female neighbor with a baseball bat by hitting her in the head. Officers attempted to speak with the man, but he refused to comply, going in and out of his house several times; eventually staying inside. While the officers tried to de-escalate the situation, additional units from Orinda, Lafayette, Walnut Creek (with a K-9 unit), and a trained negotiator from the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office arrived.

The Community Warning System (CWS) issued a lockdown alert for the area. Authorities urged residents to go inside and lock all doors and windows as a safety precaution. The alert was even-

tually lifted at 4 p.m.

"Officers attempted to negotiate with the suspect by calling him and through a PA System," explained King. "We even had drones to observe the residence." The suspect, at one point, opened the front door holding a gun and tried to shoot down the drone. He also tried to fire a shot at the officers, which wound up lodged in the door. Officers used "a less lethal weapon" (bean bag bullets) to try and stop him, in order to take him into custody, with no luck.

The standoff continued until 2:30 p.m. when the suspect went into his backyard and committed suicide using an AR-15 style rifle. No one else was home at the time of the incident.

The suspect's victim was transported to John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek and was released later that evening. "We're very thankful for the assistance we received from our allied agencies," stated King. "We did our best to resolve the situation as quickly as possible."

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