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Moraga Chamber's new executive director works to get businesses back on track

By Vera Kochan

After nearly a year without anyone in the executive director's position at the Moraga Chamber of Commerce, Katie Bidstrup has agreed to take the reigns following a trial period when her title was preceded by the word "interim."

"There was a lot to consider when taking on the role," replied Bidstrup. "It is a part-time position, and I didn't know that I had the time it was going to need to bring it up to speed, nor the time to get everything done in a part-time capacity." During the interim period she donated her time with the expectation that the chamber board would hire someone else permanently.

Having been a small business owner for several years herself, Bidstrup was aware of the struggles involved. Originally working in the field of marketing and public relations for 15 years, she purchased Lango Kids (a program that teaches Spanish, French and Mandarin to kids ages 18 months - 12 years). The classes were held in schools, community centers or privately, which allowed her to remain home with her young son. The business was a success and allowed her the opportunity to purchase a second business, Gymboree Play & Music. She acquired three locations which she owned and operated for five years: Oakland, El Cerrito and one in her hometown of Lafayette.

Bidstrup was a chamber member in Lafayette and appreciated the services that were provided to small businesses. When she heard that Moraga was looking for an executive director she thought it would be a great opportunity to give back.

One of the first improvements Bidstrup made was to have a phone line installed. "It's silly, but it's one of the most important things," she said. "While the board had created a new email address, there was not an alternative method for anyone to contact the Chamber." She's also thrilled about new changes coming to the website. There are plans to include a job board, an updated directory, and a calendar of events that will not only contain Chamber business, but public as well.

It has not been an easy return to business as usual for the Chamber. "Since it was in the middle of COVID, and a new director was not on-hand, there was not a formal hand-off from director to director," recalled Bidstrup. "Information was dispersed to and handled by the board for nearly a year. Duties, access, accounts were split amongst board members. Collecting and organizing that information has taken time and is still occurring as things come up. Some access and information has unfortunately been lost, so recreating those have been challenging."

Collecting Chamber dues was one of the first orders of business in trying to get things back to normal.

Several businesses didn't feel supported through the pandemic and were reluctant to pay their dues.

Without the full accounting of dues to support Chamber operations, services and event financing, the all-volunteer board of directors began to discuss the feasibility of continuing within Moraga.

Additional hurdles included "addressing taxes and filing; upgrading our CRM system; advocating for ARPA funds at the town council; getting to know the business owners and their needs; learning in what events the Chamber participates; and sorting which person or organization handles which item," Bidstrup added. As if all of that wasn't enough, in February the Chamber office was burglarized and suffered the loss of a laptop and checkbooks.

The Chamber is striving to become involved in liaison meetings and community programs, but is still in the process of maneuvering its way through its "to-do list." The pandemic was the catalyst for so many difficulties the Chamber has had to deal with. Besides losing a longtime executive director, seven of 12 board members left. There's been an outreach effort to fill the vacated positions on the board. "We would love to have additional representation from doctor offices, professional services, marketing, technology, the service industry, etc.," stated Bidstrup. In the meantime, it is hoped that Moraga's businesses, whether Chamber members or not, reach out for help.

"I love meeting the business owners," Bidstrup said. "I love hearing their stories and finding ways we can help. It's not easy out there at any time to own a business, pandemic or no. All of the weight of owning a business rests on the owner's shoulders, from staffing to financing to insurance and safety. A business owner works seven days a week, on site or in their head. I really want them to know that not only me, but the Chamber sees them and wants to help."

Bidstrup's future game plan is to follow her credo "A Strong Community makes for Strong Business" by getting both groups involved with each other through social media, website, job board, calendar and business directory. She's also hoping to increase foot traffic through a Moraga gift card program; getting Saint Mary's College students and faculty involved in the business community; approach the town council for more ARPA funding; create an ArtWalk event; and bring back the Community Faire.

"While things are improving for some, many many of your local businesses are facing new and lingering challenges with increased costs, staffing shortages and back-due bills and rent," reminded Bidstrup. "We invite the public to let your town council know how important it is to increase and prioritize support for local businesses. Let's keep our Moraga businesses in Moraga and let's support them in order to do that!"

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