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Town council gives thumbs up to Comprehensive Advanced Planning Initiative/Housing Element update

By Vera Kochan

Heading down the home stretch of the long and winding road which is the Comprehensive Advanced Planning Initiative/Housing Element, Planning Director Afshan Hamid and Consultant Barry Miller made their final presentation to the town council during its Jan. 25 meeting. The council was asked to consider three resolutions and two ordinances in order to adopt the new Housing Element by the state's Jan. 31 deadline. Bollinger Canyon rezoning and Rheem Objective Development and Design Standards will be considered in February and March.

While many residents still feel disgruntled about Moraga's requirement to add within the next eight years 1,118 new housing units to a town of roughly 9,456 square miles, perhaps one can take heart in the fact that San Francisco's 46.87 square miles is required to add 82,000 new homes to its already jam-packed living conditions. It would seem that S.F. has nowhere to go but up.

The Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) has broken down Moraga's requirements into 318 very low-income units, 183 low-income units, 172 moderate-income units, and 445 above moderate-income units. Council members unanimously approved all three resolutions and the two ordinances after months of updates, surveys and changes requested by themselves, Moraga residents and the State Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD).

Resolution 1 is the Final Environmental Impact Report. It certifies the FEIR for the Comprehensive Advanced Planning Initiative; adopts a mitigation monitoring and reporting program (MMRP) including 24 different measures to reduce future development impacts; and adopts findings and statement of overriding considerations for the Housing Element. Hamid notes that this is a "Program Level" EIR -- future projects will still be subject to environmental review.

Resolution 2 is the Adoption of the 2023-2031 Housing Element; it finds that the town has responded to all state comments; it also finds that the Element is in substantial compliance with the government code; and it authorizes transmittal of a "tracked change" and "clean" copy to HCD for a compliance determination. The state has 60 days to issue a decision letter upon receipt.

Resolution 3 concerns the General Plan Amendments. This resolution amends the 2002 Moraga General Plan so that it is internally consistent with the Housing Element; it responds to state law to address wildfire and evacuation in the Safety Element; it responds to state law on "Vehicle Miles Traveled" (VMT) for measuring transportation impacts; and it also includes various other (non-substantive) amendments to keep the plan current.

Ordinance 1 pertains to Moraga Center. This ordinance increases allowable density from 20 to 24 units per acre on mixed-use sites and most R-20 sites; and it rezones several "commercial-only" parcels to mixed use (allowing housing, commercial, or both). This ordinance would not change development standards (such as heights, setbacks, etc.) adopted in 2010 and 2020 as part of the Moraga Center Specific Plan (MCSP) and MCSP Implementation Project. Projects in the Housing Element call for staff review of these standards in 2023, including recommendations for council consideration.

Ordinance 2 is directed toward the Rheem Center. This ordinance creates two new zoning districts: Rheem Park Mixed Office-Residential, and Rheem Park Mixed Commercial-Residential. It also adopts standards for these districts allowing housing up to 24 dwelling units per acre, in addition to office/commercial uses; lastly it amends the zoning map for key sites in the Rheem Park commercial district.

As mentioned earlier, many residents are fearful that the Moraga as we know it will take a turn for the worse, in a variety of directions. The plain and simple truth is that the state is requiring all of its municipalities to conform to the 6th Cycle Housing Element mandates. According to Hamid and Miller's staff report, non-compliance will result in "adverse consequences, including ineligibility for many state and regional grants (including grants for transportation, planning, etc.), vulnerability to lawsuits, fines and penalties, and potential loss of local land use control."

Community input has been unprecedented with outreach to over 7,000 people. A survey of 1,200 individuals showed that the majority of respondents were in favor of having more amenities and a variety of housing options.

There are many benefits on the horizon for Moraga. A better mix of housing will allow seniors, young families, first-time home buyers and the town's workforce a chance to afford living in Moraga.

In turn, the increase in residents will hopefully generate new retail and restaurants into both shopping centers and create walkable and pedestrian oriented areas. Many have noted the run-down conditions of both shopping centers (more so, the Moraga Shopping Center). Recently a visiting Saint Mary's College alumni asked this reporter, "What happened to the Moraga Center? It's such a dump," noting the paint is peeling, the parking lots need repair, and some of the signage is faded.

The high cost of buying a home in Moraga has priced out a lot of young families wishing to move into town to take advantage of the excellent schools. With this decrease in student population, funding opportunities have been impacted. By the same token SMC students, faculty and staff will be able to live closer to campus and contribute to retail by shopping within Moraga.

The town has taken into consideration residents' concerns regarding wildfire/evacuation; mitigating traffic congestion; preserving hillsides and open space; and retaining the feel of established neighborhoods by

performing evacuation studies; traffic studies; centering much of the new housing in commercial centers; and encouraging Accessory Dwelling Units as inclusionary housing. Recent feedback from developers and property owners will result in the actual construction of a better mix of housing and two vibrant live-shop-walk-work villages.

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