

Published December 20th, 2023

State of the Town event well attended by locals

By Vera Kochan



Mayor Renata Sos

There was plenty of good cheer in the air during Moraga's State of the Town event, and not just because of the holidays. Hosted at the Saint Mary's College Soda Center, it was clear that the Dec. 13 festivities offered old friends a chance to catch up, and others to make new acquaintances. There was one common denominator among the 230 attendees: pride in Moraga.

The mid-day affair, sponsored by Moraga Citizens Network, Moraga Chamber of Commerce and SMC began with some networking that segued into a buffet lunch. After the meal, the college's Interim President Brother Thomas Jones started the presentation with a "Welcome" address by stressing the importance of maintaining a town/gown relationship. County Supervisor Candace Andersen thanked Mayor Renata Sos for her leadership, and surprise guest speaker, SMC Men's Basketball head coach Randy Bennett said, "Moraga is a great place to live," and that it was the only place the family wanted to settle down when he was hired to coach. Bennett also chose the moment to praise SMC's administration and students, many of whom get involved in the community through volunteer work.

Before proceeding with an impassioned presentation that included slides to emphasize some of the finer points, Sos acknowledged and thanked several key attendees in the building along with fellow council members Steve Woehleke, Kerry Hillis, and David Shapiro, as well as Vice Mayor Teresa Onoda. "My hope for today is to provide you with a look under the proverbial hood to give you a clearer picture of the engine that is our town government. Keeping the town running, financially strong and aesthetically pleasing is what your town government does day in and day out. It is what provides the framework to permit this town to flourish."

In acknowledgement of Moraga's upcoming 50th Anniversary, Sos discussed how the town's initial leaders created a foundation that was geared toward this particular community with a vision for the future. Several points of pride include a consistent rating as one of the safest cities in the state; the only municipality in Contra Costa County with a high-ranking four-year university; and public schools that are ranked among the best in not only the Bay Area, but California and the nation.

"We are a community with an established ethos of volunteerism and community service," stated Sos. "We see evidence of this regularly in the many active community service organizations that thrive in a town of only 17,000 residents. When our residents identify an issue, find a problem, or have an idea of how to improve our town, they organize, roll up their sleeves, and work until the task is successfully completed - all without any expectation of recognition or reward."

Sos also noted Moraga's hills, scenic vistas, open spaces and abundance of hiking trails which make the town so unique as compared to other cities and towns.

"Our staff consistently provides services and programming that are responsive to the needs of this community and at the level of quality that our residents expect and deserve," Sos continued. "Yet, on a per capita basis, we have the smallest town staff in the Lamorinda area." The Moraga Police Department ensures that the town is one of the safest in the state; Public Works engineers continuously obtain grants and outside funding for major projects; Maintenance personnel work around the clock to keep the town hazard-free and attractive; the Finance Department operates with full transparency; the Town Planners work to maintain the character of the General Plan; and Parks and Recreation keeps Moraga busy with activities geared for any age level. Sos also pointed out the valued role that Town Manager Scott Mitnick plays as team leader.

Listing the many accomplishments that the town has achieved in 2023, Sos discussed the efforts to enhance safety for school children, pedestrians and cyclists; MPD and Moraga-Orinda Fire District's continuing preparation for emergencies; and multi-million dollar grants to improve strategic intersections and acquire Smart Signals.

Additionally, there have been stronger efforts to strengthen relations with local business and SMC; and the town council has rezoned commercial areas to allow for mixed-residential - retail development. A completed Housing Element has earned the state's approval; and continued investment in an improved infrastructure

and public facilities has seen streets, storm drains, new park restrooms and the library reap the benefits.

Referring to the town's fiscal report card, Sos reported that Fiscal Year 23/24 and 24/25 budgets have balanced; Capital Improvement: \$20.8 million (over 2 years); the General Fund Reserve levels are sound; future pension obligations are being met; and the town has received the Government Finance Officers' Association Distinguished Budget Presentation and Financial Planning Award.

Sos stated, "Although the town accomplished a great deal this year, we are clear-eyed about the challenges we face in making sure that Moraga will continue to evolve and prosper, while retaining the town's very essence that we all cherish." With that said, Sos added that infrastructural needs must be continually met; financial stability maintained; encourage commercial property owners to work with the town in boosting the local economy; and continue to recruit the best town employees possible.

Looking to the future, the town hopes to see two vibrant shop-live-work villages; a student/family friendly college town; a better mix of housing for seniors, students, teachers, public safety personnel, and families with young children; open space and hillsides with access to hiking and biking; continued community participation by residents; and a place where everyone can feel safe and welcome.

Sos informed the attendees of what they have to look forward to during Moraga's 50th Anniversary celebration in 2024. The Town was officially incorporated on Nov. 12, 1974, and the Anniversary Ad Hoc Committee has several things planned for the coming year. The Moraga Historical Society will install educational displays in the Moraga Library during September, October and November; a parade will kick off the annual Moraga Pear Festival in September; a Time Capsule will be buried in front of the Town Council Chambers; and a town cookbook will be for sale starting in the summer which will include favorite family recipes in all categories from Moraga residents. Pear recipes are welcome, but not a must. The committee urges residents to submit their recipes by Feb. 28 to cc.recipes/moraga or click on the 50th anniversary box at moraga.ca.us. Any questions email: moragacookbook@gmail.com.

In closing the State of the Town event, Sos remarked, "Fifty years ago this town was founded on the shared ethic of service to others, kindness towards and respect for everyone, and generosity towards our neighbors. It is this shared ethic that not only makes Moraga a great place to live, work, and raise a family today, but promises a bright tomorrow. Thank you for coming today, thank you for sharing in this celebration, and thank you for being an integral part of this community's journey into the future."

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