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Moraga Council Hires New Town Manager

By *Sophie Braccini*



Michael Segrest Picture courtesy of the Snowmass Sun

A wind of cohesiveness swept through the Town Council as it unanimously agreed to sign the contract hiring D. Michael Segrest as Moraga's new Town Manager. The five Council Members spoke highly of their chosen candidate and clearly responded to some negative comments that were presented by residents in attendance at that night's Council meeting. Mike Segrest will start work on March 23.

Segrest comes from Snowmass Village, a small resort town in Colorado, where he was hired as Town Manager in 2002 to handle a large commercial and mixed-use development project (more than 600 housing units are included in the Base Village development). He was also instrumental in the building of a recreational facility.

Segrest was hired by Moraga after a comprehensive hiring process that distilled more than 80 candidates to three finalists and the negotiation of a contract. "The hiring process was conducted very thoroughly," said Jay Tashiro, who has been Moraga's Interim Town Manager since the departure of Phil Vince last year. Tashiro described a process that included community input to define the new Manager's profile, many interviews, meetings of the top 3 candidates with the Town's department heads and thorough review of all references.

Some residents expressed concern about the financial package that was offered to Segrest in a time of financial constraints: "Given Moraga's challenging financial condition, lack of adequate staff and police protection, and our rule of being a minimal government I'm appalled at what you are proposing," said resident Lee Bren, who estimated the total cost of hiring Segrest at \$300,000 for the first year.

The hiring package includes an annual salary of \$180,000, a \$500/month car allowance, a temporary housing allowance of up to \$3,000/month for one year, and other benefits including relocation costs, vacation, sick and administrative leave time, health and other insurance, and participation in the Public Employees Retirement System.

"This salary is similar to what our previous Town Manager received and is less than what I had in Corte Madera," said Tashiro.

"We want to give our Manager pay equity with the towns and cities around us," added Council Member Chew, "it is important for his credibility."

"To get a well qualified professional you need to stay with the market rate," said resident Jeff Schwartz in support of the Council's choice, "a great town manager can make or break a town with the directions and decisions he makes, the people he hires, his management style... from what I know, we have the right person."

Others expressed doubts about the non-democratic aspect of a process in which residents were not directly involved in the selection of their town manager.

"The Council reviewed this, a sub-committee reviewed that, but something was missing -- the public. Where was the public?" asked resident Dennis Wanken.

"I understand the concern and we did our best to include local groups in defining the profile for our Manager," answered Council Member Karen Mendonca, "but as the process continued, we could not open it up too much because the position of the candidates would be compromised and we needed to protect confidentiality." She reminded the audience that residents elect their Council Members for the purpose of representing them and to act as their agents in choosing what is best for Moraga.

Council Member Mike Metcalf summarized the Council's position by saying, "Mr. Segrest was brought into a community (Snowmass Village) that had a hard time deciding what it was going to do in terms of development. Under the direction of the Council, he got things done. We've been dead in the water for the last ten or fifteen years and he is ready to come here and deal with everything that will be thrown at him, and I admire him for that."

Mayor Dave Trotter explained, "We spent many hours interviewing all the candidates in closed sessions, and Mr. Segrest gained a very good grasp of the nuances of this community in a very short period of time. He was head and shoulders above the other two final candidates." Trotter added that Segrest appeared to have been the staff's choice as well.

Council Member Howard Harpham directly addressed the source of the discontent, "I understand the rage which can come when you start off with a lot, but not all, of the information." he said, "I wish I could share with you the resume, the experience and the statements that were made... We hired this man, we should support him, so he succeeds."

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