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Moraga Council Delays Staff Move

By *Sophie Braccini*

A decision by Moraga Town Manager Mike Segrest to move his staff out of the Town's office building at 329 Rheem and back to the Hacienda de las Flores started a town-wide hubbub that the Council tried to calm during its September 23rd meeting. The move was to take place immediately, with staff remaining at the Hacienda until seismic work is completed at 329 Rheem. The Council asked staff to postpone the relocation until the retrofit works actually begins, in 2011. But some community members doubt that the town will find the money to remodel the proposed town hall and fear that staff will continue to be located at the Hacienda for an undetermined period of time. Segrest says he proposed the move in order to improve the operational efficiency of his team, which is currently split between the two buildings; Segrest, the Town Clerk and the Planning Department are at 329 Rheem (the building purchased by the town with the intent of using it as a permanent Town Hall), while the Hacienda de las Flores is home to Finance, Public Works and Parks and Recreation. Some residents saw the proposed move as a threat to the historical mission of the Hacienda as a community center; they did not believe that the relocation would only be temporary. Many residents recall when the town acquired the Hacienda. "The Hacienda was purchased in 1973 to become a park and community center," recalled Moraga Movers President George Fisher. "Our group considers the Hacienda as their home, and we urge the Council to return it to its original designation." "It was Moraga's first park, it predates the town's incorporation and it is simply too valuable a space to be used for Town Offices," added Bob Reynolds of the Hacienda Foundation, a volunteer group that was formed to enhance, protect, and preserve the Hacienda. Some residents had concerns regarding the legality and safety of the move. "The Hacienda is not ADA (American with Disability Act) compliant, it is not secure for staff operation and you haven't checked into the legality of the move," said resident Alex Teller, "If you don't modify anything, you can say that you are studying, but if modifications are made, then you have to comply with the entirety of the law." Two Council Members tried to resist the crowd's desire to keep staff from moving back in its entirety to the Hacienda. Council Member Karen Mendonca stated, "We don't have an issue of space here, but an issue of trust." To which Fisher responded, recalling the last "temporary" move of staff to the Hacienda that has lasted for 30 years, "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me." Vice Mayor Ken Chew tried to oppose the crowd as well by stating, "Doing what's popular is not always what's right," and asked what would be the benefit of not moving staff to the Hacienda immediately. Council Member Mike Metcalf, who supported keeping half of the staff at Rheem replied, "A benefit will be to remove that topic from our agenda ... this is 'speed-bump 2009.'" He added that the Council needed to have the confidence of the community that staff would indeed move back to 329 Rheem and stick to the schedule. Mayor Dave Trotter agreed that staff "could suffer further" and that keeping them in two buildings would be an enticement to get the work done at 329 Rheem that much faster. The vote of the Council did appease many residents who felt their voices had been heard. "They will have more time to study the legal and technical issues linked to the move," said Teller, who recommended that a certified structural engineer study the Hacienda. Segrest acknowledged the decision and added, "Staff is resilient; we will make it work." But some residents stated that the resolution did not resolve any of the underlying issues. Reynolds expressed great disappointment. "One of the major points is financing," said Reynolds, "right now the town does not have any idea of where and when it will find the money to retrofit 329 Rheem, and as long as that work is not completed, part of the staff will remain at the Hacienda, impairing our ability to raise the large amount of money we need to restore the building." In the 2008-2009 budget, staff estimated the cost to retrofit 329 Rheem at \$560,000. Reynolds warned that the Foundation might be better off postponing any fund raising effort until all the uncertainties are clarified. Reynolds added that he was not opposed to reuniting the staff at the Hacienda to improve their operations, since they were already occupying part of the building, but that maybe other solutions needed to be looked at, including moving staff to an entirely different location.

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