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Moraga Specific Plan: The Democratic Process Takes Work

By Sophie Braccini

At the January 13th meeting of the Moraga Town Council the Moraga Center Specific Plan was reviewed yet again, or as Council Member Dave Trotter put it, "We've been massaging this for six months now."

However lengthy and detailed the process is, it seems that the text is always subject to modification, last minute additions, or, as was the case on January 13th, "mistakes" that delay final votes. A few motivated residents in attendance waited over three hours for the Council to work through its agenda and take up the Specific Plan. The discussion continued until midnight, and no final decision was made. That led some residents to ask whether the process still involved the public at the level it should.

"This is a public hearing and there is nobody here, you should not take a vote on this tonight," said Barbara Simpson. "How are the public's concerns addressed?" asked Jeffrey Fara, who said he had sent two letters and never received an answer. "This project got so much bigger than was discussed in the past; how did it get that way?" asked Connie Hayes. At midnight, it was clear that the document was not yet ready and the final decision was postponed.

Of the five members of the public that were present to hear about a plan that could change the downtown significantly, only two stayed until the end of the meeting. It was easy to get lost in the debate over the use "will" or "could" in the CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) Findings regarding the implementation of a recreation facility in the Moraga Center. Members of the Council wondered how a recreation center/gym was again referenced as being mandatory rather than just a possibility, as the Council had previously agreed. "I explained at previous meetings that we first had to work on the political aspects of the documents and that the thousand pages that compose the plan and the EIR (Environmental Impact Report) would be reconciled at the end," explained Planning Director Lori Salamack, "only one discrepancy was found and it will be fixed."

The reappearance of the gym was not the only element that concerned consultant Dick Loewke, representing the main property owner, the Bruzzone family. "One of our major concerns is the removal of a paragraph that allowed the reuse of the adopted Environmental Impact Report for projects that are compliant with the plan," said Loewke. Adding the obligation for each and every project to go through complete individual EIRs would add costs and threaten the likelihood of the plan to be implemented, according to Loewke. A compromise was found to change that language in the final document.

On the other hand, no satisfaction was given to the Bruzzones regarding an additional 50 feet of setback from the creek that, according to Loewke, "takes away some of the best flat land for affordable housing, and will transpose the buildings to steeper slopes where they will be more visible."

During the evening, the public received a good summary of the rationale that took the plan where it is now, when Salamack responded to questions. "We could have planned a lower number of dwelling units and still satisfy our State housing mandate," she explained, "but there needs to be sufficient development to fuel the revitalization in the Moraga Center. The Council put a cap on the number of units, and required that the traffic impact be less than the General Plan's. The Specific Plan needs to provide amenities, a quality of life and a sense of place. All these factors have taken us where we are." Salamack said that the Plan stems from needs identified by residents in the first year of planning, the first one being senior housing, that does not exist in Moraga and the impact of which is much less than single-family housing. Other needs are student housing (1000 undergrad students from Saint Mary's live off campus), and professional and work-force housing.

The Specific Plan sub-committee will meet again to work out acceptable language before the Council again takes up, and hopes to approve, the Plan on January 27th. "It won't be the end of the road, just the end of the beginning," said Salamack, referring to the implementation phase. In the meantime she is available by phone or email to respond to residents' questions. "When you are in a democracy it is work," she concluded, "People have to participate for it to work." She can be reached at 888-7043, or by email to lsalamack@moraga.ca.us.

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