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## Moraga's Budget: No Fat Left to Cut

By *Sophie Braccini*

Emily Boyd, Moraga's Interim Administrative Services Director, presented a balanced operating budget for 2011/2012 to the Town's Audit and Finance Committee on May 25. The story is a familiar one - Moraga operates within its means; Moraga is lean; Moraga is frugal; and Moraga is 'the new normal.'

This begs some questions. After all non-essential items have been cut, doesn't the Town now have to curtail expenses that will impact services to residents? Won't the lack of investment and projects for the Town end up creating an economically stagnant community? Both the Town Manager and the Mayor answer 'no', and despite harsh times for municipal finances, these public officials say they want to develop a long-term vision for the Town. One of the cost-saving features of the 2011/2012 budget is that the position held by Senior Planner Rich Chamberlain will not be filled when the long-time staffer retires in November of 2011. Planning Director Lori Salamack is leaving this summer; she will be replaced - Town Manager Jill Keimach indicated that she is interviewing some very interesting candidates at this time. The only staff left in Planning who possess institutional knowledge of the town's history will be Assistant Planner Kelly Suronen and Administrative Assistant Kelly Clancy.

"Rich's (Chamberlain) position will not be filled for now," says Keimach because, "we do not foresee a volume of development in Town requiring the filling of that position. But we are not suppressing it. When things start to pick up, and additional revenue comes in, we will hire someone." Keimach does not believe that projects such as Rancho Laguna, Palos Colorados, or the Moraga Center Specific Plan Area will start generating staff work for many months. The tight budget does not allow for many capital improvement projects. A large part of the revenue for capital improvements comes from one-time grants and is assigned to specific projects; like the \$737,000 in funding from Measure WW that must be used for parks and recreation and is financing the renovation of the Camino Pablo Elementary School sports field.

The only significant improvement project is the continuation of the renovation of the Town-owned building at 329 Rheem Blvd. Many of the other tasks aimed at reviving the town are managed by volunteers who offer free expertise when they have the time; such as the Town Council and the Economic Action Team.

"One of the Council's goals for the year is to develop a long term strategic financial plan," says Mayor Karen Mendonca, who is among those not paid to serve, "Jill (Keimach) and I are used to working with such plans. That helps for developing a long- term strategy." The Town Council will approve the budget at a future meeting. Better Yield for Developer's Fees?

The two million dollar fee the Town of Moraga received from the Richfield Investments Corporation, which will eventually construct 100 + homes on its Palos Colorados property, sits in an account with a very minimal yield. No investment strategy was ever proposed for this money, other than to keep it as "bank" for the Town. Council members have asked staff, in the past, to seek other options. The challenge is to find a safe investment with high liquidity. At a May 25 meeting, Finance Committee member Gary Breaux offered to look into options that could double the yield without compromising the safety of the investment; he will report back.

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