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Howard Harpham's Vote Needed

By Sophie Braccini

The Town Council is in agreement that Moraga will adopt a Climate Action Plan. Such a Plan will define objectives and a road map to reduce the Town's greenhouse gas emission. But a point of disagreement arose during the Council's November 9 meeting: how the volunteers who will design this plan should be selected.

What looks, on the surface, like a minor procedural point reveals a divide in the way the council members perceive the role and functionality of government. Two members wanted to have the volunteers handpicked by a subset of the Council, while two others thought the selection should be made by staff. Since Council Member Howard Harpham, the fifth vote, was out of town, the issue was continued to a later meeting.

The need for a Climate Action Plan Task Force was not in dispute. As Town Manager Jill Keimach explained it, the State will require all new developments to be evaluated for their potential to increase air pollution, greenhouse gases, odors, and hazardous materials unless they comply with the Climate Action Plan of the jurisdiction in which they operate. To simplify permitting procedures, municipalities are designing their own Climate Action Plans that aspire to be both business- and climate-friendly. "It's about compliance and the welfare of the Town," said Vice Mayor Mike Metcalf, "we have no choice."

Plans that other municipalities have already approved vary widely, from those that design a road map to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent by the year 2020 (Union City), to an 80 percent reduction by 2050 (Albuquerque).

When the final makeup of the Task Force could heavily influence what a Moraga Climate Action Plan might look like, it may not be surprising if the decision of who gets to pick its members takes on an ideological bent.

Moraga has used different methods to choose its volunteers. For many committees and commissions, the Town sends out a call for volunteers, and interested residents come forward. They are interviewed and appointed by the Council. For temporary committees, two other methods have been used in the recent past: selection by a few members of the Council, as was the case with the Revenue Enhancement Committee RECOM (then-mayor Dave Trotter and Council Member Mike Metcalf wrote the Charter and selected the volunteers); or appointment by staff according to a set of criteria approved by the Council, such as to the Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC).

"It is important to take the politics out of the selection of this group," said Council Member Ken Chew, "Staff will be able to create a balanced committee, and then we can add Council Members to it." Mayor Karen Mendonca supported that position, "We want staff to choose members who represent a broad cross-section of the community, and it is important to have consistency in the way committees are selected," she said, in reference to the formation of the EDAC.

"Appropriateness is more important to me than consistency," answered Metcalf. "There were differences between EDAC and RECOM and the recruitment was done differently and appropriately."

"We will need to have developers, property owners and environmentalists on that committee," added Trotter, "It is not realistic to have such a plan divorced from politics."

The full Council is expected to convene on November 30 and make its decision. Whatever method is used to appoint the Task Force, it's likely to take about 18 months to develop a Climate Action Plan.

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