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Rustic or Electronic?

By Sophie Braccini

The town marquee on Moraga Road, across from the Commons Park, is rustic. Its dark wooden frame holds letters on a white background - staff manually changes the marquee's message once a week, at night so the process is invisible to residents, to keep people informed of coming events. Upgrading to a more modern way of communicating is one of the Town Council's objectives for 2013, so on Oct. 8 Jay Ingram, parks and recreation director, presented council members with a proposal to install one or more electronic signs.

"The installation of electronic signs has many potential benefits," said Ingram. "It would increase the ability to distribute important community-wide information; increase efficiency for staff; give the ability to provide a variety of messages by time of day; and offer the potential to partner with local organizations in order to reduce capital costs for installation." Ingram listed numerous organizations that use the marquee to announce their events, adding that the volume has been steadily increasing and that it is not unusual for groups to reserve marquee space three months in advance.

Ingram proposed to replace the existing marquee with an electronic sign that could be changed remotely and would be lit. He added that such a sign would permit displaying emergency messages, notifications of town events, and would save on staff time.

Bob Reynolds of the Moraga Park Foundation agreed that the marquee has been very useful and he supported the idea of modernizing it. "I get really almost positively giddy when I think about the possibilities (of a new sign) at that location," he said. "When we advertise the summer concerts we are very limited as to what we can say. (With a new sign) we could talk about this week's concert, the specialty meals we prepare, next week's concert; for the 4th of July we could detail the program, we could also advertise classes at the library. And my understanding is that you could run many messages simultaneously on a sign like this." Reynolds recommended that staff look at Lafayette's marquee policy as it considers new guidelines - in Lafayette the use of the marquee is free but users need to provide their own displays.

Resident Ellen Beans suggested that two new marquees could be installed, one on Moraga Way, and one on St. Mary's Road.

Councilmember Roger Wykle expressed initial nostalgia for the old sign. "If there is anything that screams semi-rural, it's that sign," he said. He subsequently recognized the added functionality of an electronic sign, but warned against obnoxious luminous signage that would be out of character in Moraga, and potentially distracting for drivers. Councilmember Michael Metcalf said he had been in town long enough to have grown tired of the old sign that according to him is nearing blight. He championed the project, which he believes can be done tastefully and will improve communication.

Mayor David Trotter recommended that staff focus first on the Moraga Road marquee then see if it could be duplicated in other locations, possibly with partners.

An initial estimate by one sign company totaled about \$37,000 per sign. Potential funding sources include the Comcast unrestricted funds - the town received a one-time distribution from Comcast in 2006. The money was placed in a separate fund and some was used to redesign the town's website in fiscal year 2010-11. The current balance is \$86,233.

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[back](#)

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