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After 4 years, Moraga approves new Chase building

By Sophie Braccini



Chase Bank location at the corner of Moraga Way and School Street. Image provided

commission's final assent, to bring it to a council vote.

Moraga's latest Town Council Meeting was the stage of a long-lived piece of local drama, one that pits those who want to create a new vision for the downtown versus those who take into account what exists and settle for it.

This time it was the design of the new Chase Bank at the corner of Moraga Way and School Street (Bob's Christmas Tree lot) that was at stake. The result was predictable: Like when Dollar Tree or Moraga Center Homes (The City Ventures project) were approved, if the code permits it, it will be built. And right now there are no zoning rules in the Moraga Center Specific Plan that could justify adding more trees, larger sidewalks or even a setback from the street, as some residents and officials may want.

The new bank building has been reviewed and discussed for four years, going through study sessions with planning staff, the design review board and planning commission. Mayor Teresa Onoda appealed the planning

commission's final assent, to bring it to a council vote. Chase Bank claims to have 3400 clients in Moraga. At the March 22 town council, its representative, Market Director of Real Estate Ronald Chester, stated that Chase would walk out altogether if the council added more conditions to approve the project.

The new bank's site will be located in a very prominent position in the future downtown as envisioned by the MCSP. School Street is earmarked to become the downtown main street and that corner would be the entrance to that commercial area.

The mayor said that she wanted to start implementing the vision of the MCSP with this project. She reminded the council that that vision was to create an environment more pedestrian- and less auto-centered. She added that shopping has changed, everything can be delivered, and that downtowns need to create an environment where people want to hang out. For example, Onoda wanted to add a larger sidewalk, six feet instead of five feet, and remove some of the parking lots along the School Street portion of the site to accommodate both a wider sidewalk and an ample vegetation buffer.

Council Member Kymberleigh Korpus, who was on the planning commission when the study session took place, detailed her own requests. She reminded the council that the MCSP calls for School Street to include two traffic lanes, a wide pedestrian path, a bicycle lane and angled parking. She said that to achieve this it would require massive widening, but that if the Chase project is approved as is, this will not be possible.

The two women were not followed by any of their colleagues. Vice mayor Roger Wykle said that the new building presents the general town architecture existing in Moraga, and that implementation of the MCSP vision was something that could be materialized in the future. Council Member Jeanette Fritzky added that this building reminded her of the Orchard Supply Hardware store across the street. Council Member Dave Trotter said he did not want the bank to give up on Moraga and simply asked that pear trees replace some of the trees proposed in the plan.

Trotter noted that the zoning of the MCSP is not completed yet and that for that reason there is not any requirement of any setback at this time in the municipal code.

The building's plans were approved 3-2. A committee is working on the zoning of the MCSP, but no results are expected before the end of the year.

What of Bob's

Christmas Tree lot?

Council member Dave Trotter asked property owner Dave Bruzzone where would "Bob" of Bob's Christmas Trees go this year. Bruzzone answered that he would make sure that the beloved business would be provided with adequate space in the shopping center again in 2017.



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