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Two local groups look to revitalize Moraga from the ground up

By Sophie Braccini



Teresa Onoda addresses the We Will women.

One might call it serendipity, others a convergence of perception. Two groups have recently taken off in Moraga with different strategies, but a common goal: the revitalization of Moraga. “We Will” started as a women-led movement to purchase sculptures to beautify the town, while Viva Moraga was created to advocate for economic, community, and commercial development. In a town where divisiveness has been flourishing, these two groups declare and practice a positive and constructive attitude.

On May 18 both parties met in different parts of town for two different events. Viva Moraga organized its first “Moraga Flash” at Tangelo in the Rheem Shopping

Center, a spontaneous gathering at a local business to show support. While this was going on, approximately 30 women from We Will gathered in the Bluffs to discuss buying the orange bench on lease by the artist in front of the library. The discussion quickly moved to other topics, intersecting with what Viva Moraga wants to achieve.

Amy Schofield, who is on Viva Moraga’s steering committee, says that the group plans to hold a flash Moraga event at a different business location every month all summer long.

People there discussed the coming of the microbrewery at the intersection of Canyon and School Street with Chamber of Commerce

Executive Director Kathe Nelson, and rejoiced about the opening of a new nail salon. “It is all about being positive,” said Maura Wolf, one of the Viva Moraga founders. She went to describe the three goals of the flash gatherings: to build a sense of community; to support the local business they are excited about, such as Tangelo; and to update people on the town’s upcoming planning activities. Louis Kao the owner of the future Noodle Theory in Moraga was there to answer questions about his future menu (see his story on page A12).

On the side of the plaza, Wolf tied a long string for people to attach colorful pieces of paper listing their wishes for Moraga. The

Photo Sophie Braccini

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thoughts were wide-ranging in style and scope. One read: “A place to creatively collaborate with solo-entrepreneurs.” Others said, “More things for kids,” “No car driving during after-school time,” “More fast food joints,” and “Better public transportation.”

This is where the two groups converged, gathering similar desires and energies coming from residents from all walks of life.

In the private home in the Bluffs, the women came at the invitation of Vice Mayor Teresa Onoda, Cherie Grant, Darlene Bennett and Kristin Kurth-Koelzer. Onoda started talking to the group about the positive, fun women in Moraga who want to make the town a better place to live, love and be happy. “We are embracing the arts and hope to buy the orange bench at the library, not to take a stand but to have a seat at the table, and to have others sit with us,” she said.

The women started listing what Moraga means to them on a board that had been prepared to take notes, and what they would want for the future, discussing topics

way beyond the arts.

Different generations of women were present and their desires for the town reflected it. Referring to Manteca, some suggested creating recreation facilities in Moraga that would attract patrons from the region. When Onoda noted that there was not much flat vacant land in Moraga, one of the bold women did not hesitate to propose flattening one of the shopping centers and transforming the land use completely.

Ideas of creating an incubator for Saint Mary’s students were shared along with a general desire to make Moraga more of a college town.

Since We Will wants to move quickly into action, the women decided to establish a wish list and start making it happen. Several members of Viva Moraga are also engaged in We Will. People interested in following that group’s activities should contact Cherie Grant at grant.cherie@gmail.com. The best way to follow Viva Moraga is to join its Facebook page.

Town approves Hacienda lease agreement with La Finestra owner

By Sophie Braccini

The foretold opening of a new La Finestra at the Hacienda de las Flores has garnered large support of elected officials, staff, and residents alike. At its May 23 meeting the Moraga Town Council approved a five-year lease agreement with two five-year renewal options. Due to previously booked events, the new restaurant will not open until Dec. 1 of this year.

Moraga Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg stated that the town’s first objective with this agreement was to activate the public park. The Hacienda de las Flores is a 9-acre public property that includes the main mansion, the Casita and La Sala that are smaller one-level structures, and large grounds where the Pavilion

is located, another elegant architectural piece where wedding ceremonies are often held. With the main past activity being weddings, the public space was often closed to the public on weekends, and only a few recreation classes were held during the week. The manager views the private-public partnership as a way to increase public interaction with the space.

Council Member Kymberleigh Korpus wanted to know if Battenberg was qualified to negotiate that lease. Battenberg talked about her past experience with the city of San Leandro where she negotiated several such agreements with restaurants. She added that she had also asked Main Street Properties founder Craig Semmelmeier to compare the

Hacienda lease terms with what is done in Lamorinda and got a positive opinion from the experienced commercial real estate professional. Resident Barry Behr said that he had questions about the lease that the town manager answered. He added that he asked several professionals in the same field about the lease terms and was told that the lease was a fair deal for the town and the restaurant.

Besides the rent, La Finestra will pay to the town 5 percent of net restaurant sales above \$100,000 and 10 percent of the net sales from catering events. La Finestra will be the sole preferred caterer of events held on the property.

Parks and Recreation Director

Breyana Brent indicated that of the 75 events, which are mostly weddings hosted on the property, most could be moved to the Pavilion. The town would lose revenue from about 10 events a year. The projections made by her department show a net increase in revenue for the town of about \$86,000 that will reduce the current \$252,000 annual cost of the park for the town.

Moraga has agreed to give Assadi a tenant improvement allowance of \$60,000, an amount that all parties agreed is below what is usually required of property owners. Assadi will invest in the Hacienda, most notably to update the kitchen to commercial and regulatory standards.

Battenberg also listed invest-

ments that would be needed to reposition the Hacienda: upgrade the Casita to be able to hold classes there, improve the parking lot, add way finding signs and a gas insert in the Pavilion fireplace for charm effect. The total was estimated at \$181,000.

Hollie Lucas-Alcalay, president of the Hacienda Foundation, indicated after the meeting that the group was aware of the situation and had discussed supporting some of these projects. She said that the foundation considered the upgrades to be in line with its mission statement and that her group had discussed the Casita and Pavilion projects. The Hacienda Foundation draws revenues from private donations as well as events held at the Hacienda.

Rheem Theatre slated to reopen June 14

By Sophie Braccini



Derek Zemrak and Tom Schnurr, president of the Moraga Community Foundation, sign a management agreement for the Rheem Theatre. Photo A. Scheck

Derek Zemrak and Tom Schnurr signed an agreement on Saturday, May 26 for the management of the Rheem Theatre in Moraga. Zemrak represents Zemrak Pirkle Productions, which used to manage the theater

before it closed six months ago, and Schnurr is the president of the Moraga Community Foundation that is leasing the property from owner Mahesh Puri.

Zemrak explained that Puri and representatives of the foun-

datation and his company met at Cine Cuvée in Orinda to discuss the details of the agreement. In March the town of Moraga signed a memorandum of understanding with Puri stating that he would sell the theater to the foundation for \$150,000 as he develops the vacant lot next to the theater. Prior to the completion of the sale, Puri also agreed to lease the property for \$5,000 a month for two years.

As he stepped into the theater where he had not set foot since last January Zemrak was happy at the prospect of reopening. He and Pirkle also own the Orinda Theatre and he said that their contacts with the film production studios are ongoing, mean-

ing movies will be scheduled as soon as everything at the Rheem is cleaned up and inspected. Zemrak says that June and July are big months for family entertainment and he wants to open the bottom large theater as soon as possible. Next Saturday, June 2 will be a cleanup day where everyone is invited to come and support the local venue. Community support will be the key to the success of the agreements.

Pirkle said he was also excited to be working with the MCF in an effort to reopen the Rheem Theatre on June 14. The two partners say that the interim arrangement will allow theatergoers to once again walk through the front doors and infuse positive energy

into the Art Deco theater. “We all hope for the eventual long-term solution that will see the beloved theater remain a vibrant and integral asset to the Moraga community for many years and generations to come,” they said.

Schnurr expressed his satisfaction at the signing of the management agreement. MCF’s mission is to support community assets such as the theater. He said that the MOU made the reopening possible, and he was pleased the team of Zemrak and Pirkle came back with the know-how, the community ties and hopefully the California Independent Film Festival in the fall.