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Town-Gown relationship at an all-time high

By Sophie Braccini

Saint Mary's College has scored big with the Town of Moraga recently as it had its master plan approved - after five years of work - as well as banners that will welcome students downtown in the fall. Town-gown relationships are blossoming as commencement week, starting on May 27, gets near.

"Wednesday night was really a remarkable moment in the history of the Moraga-Saint Mary's town-gown relationship," said Tim Farley, the college community and government relations director, at a public meeting following the May 10 town council meeting. He spoke of the five years of public outreach, environmental impact reviews, and multiple planning meetings that led to the seemingly effortless approval by the town council of a plan that will direct the college's development over the next 15 years.

Saint Mary's does not plan to increase in any major way its number of students, as confirmed by college president Jim Donahue at the council meeting. The vision is to improve the services provided to the students on campus, including lodging, sports facilities, and student learning and recreation spaces.

The neighboring city of Lafayette was consulted during the process. Its concerns revolved around traffic generation during construction. With the number of students staying mostly the same, the traffic study did not show any additional everyday impact.

The only element that had been noted by the planning commission during its final review was the water usage impact. The college's environmental report showed a 19 percent increase in water use, and proposed the use of the use of a water well. Commissioners had asked at their April 10 meeting if Saint Mary's could improve their water conservation practices. College's staff responded that the percentage increase had been calculated because facilities such as campus housing were added to the campus, but that it would be unlikely that water use would increase as much because the number of students and faculty would not change significantly.

The council, like the planning commission last month, approved the plan. Over the next five years the phase one projects should be completed, including a new roundabout at the crossing with St. Mary's Road to create a better entrance to the campus and improve bike circulation; a new library and learning commons; the construction of a second story for parking over the existing public parking area; the creation of a second emergency entrance/exit routes; the renovation of the McKeon pavilion; a new residence hall; repurposing the Madigan gym; and a new student center for academic activities and food.

The college received town approval during the same council meeting for hanging about 20 pole banners around town when school starts again to welcome parents and students. One council member argued that these were commercial banners that should be restricted to the commercial areas, per town policy. But the majority approved the proposal as made by the college, asking that the content highlight an event, such as back-to-school, that would be of interest to the whole community, rather than displaying subjective content. The banners were approved for 30 days. They should be displayed before and/or after the California Independent Film Festival banners that were approved to be hung from mid-August to mid-September.

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