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Moraga Town Council postpones local Poet Laureate decision

By *Sophie Braccini*

The members of the Moraga Town Council could not decide if a local poet laureate should be a shared Lamorinda resource or uniquely Moraga's.

Two projects are competing for local approval: a concept where Moraga and Saint Mary's College would collaborate to appoint an unpaid poet who would produce poetry and programs for the town, and the Lamorinda Arts Council's program that will appoint and fund a multi-cities poet that will create poetry for events and run literacy programs. The four council members present at a recent meeting could not find a majority for either option and the topic was continued to a future date.

Mayor Teresa Onoda proposes a Moraga-only poet laureate's program run by the parks and recreation department in collaboration with SMC. The idea started germinating in 2015 when Onoda and other art-minded Lamorinda people met with the Orinda Arts Council that had decided, under the leadership of Maestro Lawrence Kohl, to embrace the three communities. At the time, the idea was to combine the creativity and energy of the three communities, including SMC and local schools.

LAC's project is to appoint a laureate who will work with the three towns, or only two if Moraga does not want to join in. The nonprofit has raised money to give that person a stipend. The laureate will be appointed for two years, write poetry to celebrate events and conduct training in schools. The program does not require Moraga's financial participation.

The mayor is quite passionate about developing a unique program for Moraga. She explained at the June 28 meeting that this would contribute to making Moraga a fabulous place. She added that she has talked with SMC's president Jim Donahue countless times about this, that SMC is a powerhouse for poetry with the head of the creative writing department being the poetry editor for New York Times. She concluded that she did not want to exclude anyone, but that she was the mayor of Moraga, not of Lamorinda.

Council Member Dave Trotter argued that President Donahue had sent a letter to the council indicating that both options - a Moraga or a Lamorinda poet laureate - would be something the college would support. He said he favored the LAC's proposal because it was funded and already well defined. He wanted to make sure though that the poet could be someone working in Lamorinda and not necessarily living in Lamorinda as is indicated in the LAC's project. Vice-mayor Roger Wykle agreed.

Council member Kimberleigh Korpus, on the other hand, said that she could not support either program. She explained that she did not like in the LAC's project that the town would not have a decision-making responsibility in the choice of the poet, as that person was going to be writing about the town. She liked that this project was a private one since she believes that the town should not spend time and money running it. She added that the Moraga-only project had merits, but was not fully developed yet.

All agreed to postpone the decision to a later date. Kohl said after the meeting that LAC, as requested by the Moraga council, will provide a new proposal taking into account its feedback and thoughts.

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