

Published February 19th, 2020

The tent behind Safeway (aka Cirque du Moraga)

By Vera Kochan



Photo Vera Kochan

Ever since the large white tent was erected behind Moraga Shopping Center's Safeway in early January, locals have been speculating as to its purpose. Many have wondered (tongue-in-cheek) whether the circus was coming to town. Not so.

The tent was erected by Steve Hammond, owner of Bay Area Ballplayers, an indoor batting cage and sports training venue, as a winter-time extension of his permanent facility located at 1460-H Moraga Rd. in Moraga. Hammond's BAB opened its doors in January 2019 and became so successful that by late summer of that year he approached Moraga's Planning Department with plans to erect a tent between the months of January through April to accommodate his booming business.

According to Hammond's Project Description, "There has long been great demand for an indoor training facility during the winter time, as very few fields in Lamorinda have lights or adequate drainage to allow sports play for up to 36 hours after a strong storm." It goes on to add, "The facility will accommodate athletes of all ages, including from Moraga Baseball Association, Campolindo High School, Saint Mary's College and others from surrounding communities."

Hammond plans to operate the tent 7 days a week Monday through Friday from 2 to 9 p.m., and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends. He intends to repeat the process annually with the town and property owner's approval.

Inside the 7,524 square foot tent, are plans for an artificial turf on top of the gravel parking lot and LED lighting powered by a stand-alone solar trailer. Batting cages and the tent fabric are fire resistant and able to withstand high winds.

When Hammond had approached the town of his intentions last summer he was advised by staff that even such temporary use would require approval. However, on Jan. 3, Hammond installed the tent without the required approval of the town. On Jan. 6, the Planning Department notified Hammond that the tent needed Design Review Board approval in the Community Commercial zoning district pursuant to Moraga's Municipal Codes. Hammond submitted a Design Review Board application on Jan. 21, and on Feb. 6 the town mailed public hearing notices to neighbors as well as posting them at the project site.

Planning Department Senior Planner Steve Kowalski's staff report specifies that, "The proposed improvements (must) conform with good design as set forth in the Town of Moraga Design Guidelines, and in general contribute to the character and image of the town as a place of beauty, spaciousness, balance, taste, fitness, broad vistas and high quality." Additionally, "The structure will be protected against exterior and interior noise, vibrations and other factors which may tend to make the environment less desirable; the exterior design and appearance of the structure is not of inferior quality as to cause the nature of the neighborhood to materially depreciate in appearance and value; and the structure is in harmony with proposed developments on land in the general area."

According to the staff's analysis report, "As a temporary tent structure, it is not consistent with the quality or character of nearby commercial buildings comprising the remainder of the Moraga Center, and the visible characteristics of its temporary nature (such as the curtain-like walls, exposed metal framing and the generator trailer that provides its lighting) detract from the appearance of the surrounding commercial and residential development in the area.

"Additionally, as it is made out of vinyl wrapped around a metal frame, the tent will likely not be able to effectively prevent noise from emanating from or entering into the structure and the sound of baseballs and softballs being struck by bats could resonate from within the tent to the surrounding outside.

"Finally, the temporary tent structure is inconsistent with the land use designations and development standards prescribed by the Land Use Element of the Moraga Center Specific Plan as they relate to the mixed-use/residential characteristics of the site and its surrounding area, specifically for commercial uses as prescribed in the Mixed Retail/Residential designation since the subject area is in the town's designated Priority Development Area and slated to house the town's future downtown core featuring a mix of commercial and residential and civic uses in permanent buildings and facilities.

"While staff finds that the tent does not meet the town's design guidelines and therefore should be denied,

the request for temporary placement of the tent through April 30, 2020 creates the possibility to reconsider this request within the current context of the site."

The analysis report also states, "One could argue that since the structure will only be in place through April 30, 2020, it does not materially detract from the quality of the surroundings, most of which are comprised of vacant land, the back sides of some commercial buildings, and an open vehicle storage yard."

Additional points made acknowledge that an otherwise underutilized portion of land could be put to good use by serving as a temporary facility for the area's youth during the winter months providing that the tent's "visual quality will not be allowed to degrade from neglect or exposure to inclement weather during the period that the tent is installed."

This issue of Lamorinda Weekly went to press before a decision by the Planning Commission was made at its Feb. 18 meeting.

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA