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MCSP Town Hall takes a new turn regarding public comments

By Vera Kochan

Up until now, any public comments regarding the Moraga Center Specific Plan Implementation Project predominantly revolved around safe and efficient evacuation in the event of an emergency. With a potential increase of 630 dwellings in the Moraga Center area, the distinct possibility for that many additional vehicles trying to vacate the town creates a chaotic mental scenario to a situation that hasn't even arrived yet. Staff planned on holding two Town Hall meetings. The first one was to have taken place on Sept. 1 at the Hacienda de las Flores as an in-person event, but limited to 100 attendees in order to comply with coronavirus county health mandates. However, it was canceled as a safety precaution. The second meeting was conducted via Zoom on Sept. 2 with approximately 30 viewers in attendance.

On hand to answer the public's questions regarding fire, evacuation safety and housing laws were Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker, Moraga Police Chief Jon King and Assistant Town Attorney Karen Murphy. However, after briefly touching on those topics, the public's comments and questions began to gravitate around the MCSP's viability given the fact that it was adopted 10 years ago and in a different economic climate than today's.

Historically, the vision for a high-density, mixed-use town center was defined in the Moraga General Plan adopted in 2002 after a three-year public process. Work on the MCSP began in 2003 to be followed by seven years of public input and analysis resulting in the adoption of the 2010 Moraga Center Specific Plan.

One resident was concerned about empty storefronts, because many people have taken to shop online - a pattern that was magnified by the COVID-19 shelter-in-place mandates. Planning Director Afshan Hamid explained that the MCSP's mixed-use office/retail allows for a variety of businesses that are not reliant on online sales. Even limited-sized schools could be a possible tenant.

Another question concerned updating any differences from 2010 to present-day standards, to which Murphy replied, "The zoning updates will bring the project up to 2020 standards."

There was a suggestion to put the MCSP issue on a ballot and let residents decide whether to proceed with its implementation.

A concern arose as to whether the public's views or comments, in actuality, carry any weight against the property owner's vision for the development. Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg responded, "We are trying to implement the Plan to where everyone is pleased."

There was also a question about MCSP addressing affordable housing needs, to which it was pointed out that the Plan allows for senior and workforce housing.

Several residents questioned whether the MCSP could be amended to the current concerns of the town. The answer was "no." Amending the MCSP falls out of the scope of the Implementation Project. Any amendment of the Plan would have to be implemented through a separate project.

Aesthetically, what held true in 2010 can still be applied to 2020's standards upheld by the MCSP. The Plan calls for an economically viable and environmentally sensitive approach to development while creating a mixed-use village with local-serving commercial development and a range of residential opportunities. This also takes into consideration the revitalization of the existing Moraga Shopping Center and the Moraga Ranch complex, along with the preservation of the creek corridor. While the Plan doesn't authorize immediate construction, it is considered to be an important step toward the future development potential to the area and an influx of tax dollars into the local economy.

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

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