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Town council candidates respond to Moraga's interests now and for the future

By Vera Kochan



Kendall Langan



Teresa Onoda



Ursula Schilling



Renata Sos



David Stromberg

Of the 13 goals listed in last year's "Town Council and Community Goals for 2020 - Building for the Future," most have either been accomplished or are in the process - quite a feat considering what Moraga has gone through economically in recent years. With the Moraga Center Specific Plan, retail expansion and residential development being top of mind recently, the five candidates seeking to fill three positions on the town council were asked to respond to issues most often raised during MCSP discussions, meetings or town halls.

In alphabetical order, the five candidates are: Kendall Langan, Teresa Onoda, Ursula Schilling, Renata Sos (incumbent) and David Stromberg.

Lamorinda Weekly: One of the town council goals for 2020 was to enhance Moraga's business environment and work collaboratively with the Chamber of Commerce

and other stakeholders, yet several stand-alone storefronts have remained empty for years, especially in the Moraga Shopping Center. Granted, COVID-19 has currently stymied any productive business environment, but what can the town do post-pandemic to fill the vacancies and prevent them in the future?

Candidates: Stromberg noted that as chair of the planning commission he supported merging the design review board with the commission in order to streamline the planning department's approval of applications; voted for signage upgrades to the Rheem Shopping Center; and promoted new municipal codes to attract a wide variety of businesses.

Sos discussed the Small Business Relief Program, recently approved by the town council, which offers to reimburse businesses up to \$2,000 in COVID-related expenses; as well as the town's efforts to simplify local regulations to promote and maintain businesses in Moraga. She stressed the importance of the community shopping locally when purchasing goods and services.

Onoda has met with both Moraga Center and Rheem Center's property owners to discuss ways to enhance their properties to make them more attractive to shoppers and include the Chamber in the discussions; she has given new businesses ideas to become more successful; and worked with Art in Public Spaces to put sculptures in key areas around town to add attractive notes to the retail districts.

Onoda and Langan both agree with the importance of using social media to promote the town. Langan suggested a "Shop Moraga" campaign with the Chamber taking the lead in addition to promoting Moraga's office spaces as an alternative to "high priced office spaces in Orinda, Lafayette and Walnut Creek: More businesses, more shoppers."

Both Langan and Schilling made note of the abundance of parking available. Schilling added, "Building on what seems to thrive in our two shopping centers, Safeway, TJ Maxx, Home Goods, Ace Hardware, Moraga Liquors among many successful businesses, and a very popular Sunday Farmers' Market." She'd like to promote Moraga as a place to dine and shop.

Lamorinda Weekly: The MCSP will bring many changes, not only to the Center area proper, but to the town as a whole. Are there any aspects of the MCSP that you personally have issues with; and if you could go back in time to 2010 during MCSP's inception what would you change?

Candidates: Sos emphasized the importance for everyone to understand that the MCSP merely "provides clarity to both property owners and public officials as to what is allowed to be built." As a current town council member about to consider proposed zoning codes she cannot express her personal views, but if there was anything in the process she would change it would be for the zoning to have been completed much closer to 2010.

Onoda conceded that more housing would lead to revenue growth. "On the other hand, housing will increase traffic, which would become even more problematic if a fire ever forces people to flee en masse." Besides additional commuter traffic, Onoda is concerned about protecting the ridgeline views and the detracting aesthetics of new housing.

Langan felt that MCSP preserves open space by concentrating development in the Moraga Center area while

being situated on regional trails. While he feels that the Plan has flaws, Senate Bill 330 is requiring Moraga to grow.

Schilling feels that MCSP needs more common ground and consensus building. Stromberg has worked on the MCSP since 2015, and while he looks forward to affordable and senior housing adjacent to a mixed-use development, he felt that a "Build It Green Single-Family GreenPoint Checklist" should be mandatory rather than discretionary. "I would have preferred stricter building height limits and larger setbacks, design concepts that are more consistent with Moraga's semi-rural feel." Additionally, he wanted a mandatory pedestrian/bicycle trail along one side of the Laguna Creek and greater protection for Moraga's orchards.

Lamorinda Weekly: What areas of the MCSP do you feel will most benefit the residents and the town as a whole?

Candidates: Schilling felt that a slow, sensitive and measured growth would preserve the history and charm of Moraga. Onoda and Sos both noted that while SB 330 has put controls on the town's housing development, MCSP is meant to provide affordable housing for students, seniors and workforce within a walkable area of shops and transit. They also agree that the Plan will provide clear guidelines as to future development and minimize disagreements between the town and developers. Stromberg appreciates the centralizing of retail/commercial/ residential within a Town Center along with an extension of the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Trail; a possible Bed and Breakfast; and the preservation of Moraga Ranch.

Langan agreed with the importance of preserving Moraga Ranch in addition to creating an educational, recreational and shopping destination to help the town thrive.

The Moraga Citizens Network will host Candidates Night online. The event will be held from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Sept. 30. All five candidates will attend. For updates and information regarding login access for the event go to:

www.MCNMoraga.org. To submit a question for the candidates email:

MCN94556@gmail.com by the Sept. 25 deadline.

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

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