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Bocce Ball Players Caught Between Growth and Regulations

By Sophie Braccini



Moraga Commons Bocce Ball court Photo Andy Scheck

When it comes to Bocce Ball, Dom Sidari cannot help but speak with great passion. The retired Moraga resident has been playing the game for many years and was at the origin of the Moraga Bocce Ball Club, now in its twelfth year. Since the 90's the Club has grown and the two bocce courts that were originally built at the Moraga Commons are no longer enough for a club that boasts 120 members, organized into twenty teams, that compete on a regional level in which more than 5000 players participate regularly.

It did not seem unreasonable to Sidari to request the building of two new courts for which residents were willing to pay. But since the first courts were built, regulations have changed and Sidari has been caught for months in a sticky web.

Bocce ball is an Italian game belonging to the "boules" precision sport family; cousin to p•anque (played in Lafayette), the sport has its origin in the games played in the Roman Empire. It is played from Europe to Australia, to North and South America. Bocce is traditionally played on an oyster shell court, but has also been played on decomposed granite, soil, or asphalt courts approximately 65-88 feet in length and 8-13 feet wide, sometimes with wooden boards of approximately 1/2 foot in height surrounding the court.

"The game is great fun and many of our members are playing it," says George Fisher, President of the Moraga Movers, an organization of active seniors in Lamorinda. Fisher has been an advocate for Sidari's cause.

"We have to expand," explains Sidari, "our twenty teams play five nights a week, we compete in the County Leagues and right now we have sixty people on the waiting list."

Sidari has played bocce ball in surrounding communities and seen the many courts that are available to seniors. "Martinez has sixteen courts, Antioch has ten, Rossmoor has three, why wouldn't the Town let us build two additional courts?" asks a distressed Sidari.

The Club offered to pay for the whole construction and submitted drawings to the Town Engineer.

The response was not the enthusiastic "yes" he was expecting. Sidari received a letter from Town staff that listed all the technical requirements for the project.

"The rules of the game have changed in twelve years," explains Public Works Director Jill Mercurio, "for example, the courts have an impact on the adjacent creek and runoffs have to be mitigated, the simple sketches that we received are not sufficient for an approval."

Furthermore, the Department Fish and Game (DFG) Code, Section 1602, requires an entity to notify DFG of any proposed activity that may substantially modify a river, stream, or lake. Environmental Scientist Suzanne Gilmore of the DFG confirmed, "Development projects near creeks are advised to submit a 1600 notification to the Department."

In addition, the Moraga Commons Park suffers from an endemic parking problem. "The Town Council asked us to produce a plan for the development of the Commons," explains Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram, "at this time there is no budget to draft such a plan." He adds that he is doubtful that the 2 new courts could be accepted if a general plan that includes parking has not been approved. "There are different projects for the Park, each with potential parking impacts; we cannot approve each of them separately without a vision for the park."

Ingram is sensitive to Sidari's plea and says he is planning to meet with stakeholders to try to mediate a solution. That's what Fisher is hoping for: "Since we do have members playing, we would like to see improvement," he says, adding, "The rules are hard for Dom to work around; the staff should facilitate the process, rather than just reading the rules, and help guide him through the system."

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