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Public Forum

Moraga's Budget

On June 22, 2009, the Moraga Town Council adopted a balanced budget for the 2009/2010 fiscal year that preserves essential services and funds a number of important one-time and discretionary items. Considering what is happening to many other cities around California one may ask, "How is this possible?" The main reason is because the Town has never had the resources to expand services beyond basic levels and we have not taken on costs that we cannot support such as high levels of retirement benefits. The Town also completed some one-time items and most of the work on the Moraga Center Specific Plan and the Housing Element this past year, so those expenses are going away. Even including these savings, it was necessary to reduce the budget by almost 15%. This year the Town developed a basic operating budget that we believe will "sustain" a reasonable level of service to the community. One-time and discretionary items were initially separated out from the basic budget. These items were described as "below the line" simply to denote that they needed specific direction from Council as to whether or not they should be funded. In fact, several items totaling approximately \$650,000 were not approved by Council and were eliminated from the final budget. All of the items that were approved by Council are now in the approved budget.

To balance the general fund budget and provide a "cushion" for the potential State reduction in revenue to the Town, staff and Town Council exerted discipline to hold the line on spending and made budget reductions totaling over \$900,000. We were not able to fund a 13th police officer due to the uncertainty of a State grant which in past years has funded this position. Nonetheless, actual police staffing levels will be higher than in the recent past when we had several officers out on disability. One position in the Planning Department and one position in the Town Manager's office were also eliminated.

Two significant funding issues which the Town continues to face are infrastructure replacement (streets, storm drains, building and grounds) and capital equipment replacement. The Town has set aside funds to address capital equipment replacement for several years, but infrastructure replacement has not been funded to any significant amount in past years. The Town has relied almost exclusively on outside sources for infrastructure needs in the past. With the aging of the infrastructure and the uncertainty of outside sources of revenue in the future, this need must be addressed in the relatively near future. The Town Council has appointed a Revenue Enhancement Committee that is examining possible revenue sources to address these two deficiencies. The Town has been approved to receive over \$800,000 in grants for infrastructure needs this coming year, which will help to temporarily offset the lack of an ongoing source of revenue for this need.

The net effect of the budget approved by the Town Council is that it provides approximately \$450,000 surplus for the General Fund in fiscal year 2009-2010. This balance is, however, subject to possible "takeaways" by the State and further declines in the economy. The most likely "takeaway" is a proposed State raid on the Town's gasoline tax revenues, which could result in a loss of \$271,000 per year and would reduce the Town's ability to keep up with road repair. The Town Council adopted a policy that any surplus we realize at the year-end will be allocated first to increasing the General Fund reserve and second to future infrastructure needs. The levels of service in the basic operating budget which Town Council approved are expected to be sustainable for the foreseeable future provided the State does not withhold more than gas tax from the Town's revenues.

The actions taken by Town Council and staff have reduced the 2009/2010 budget and set expenditures to be significantly less than projected revenues. This positions the Town with a budget and basic service levels that should be sustainable into the foreseeable future, and a continuing need to adequately fund basic infrastructure replacement and maintenance.

D. Michael Segrest

Moraga

(Michael Segrest is the Town Manager of Moraga)

Moraga Off-Leash Animal Ordinance

I understand the proposed Moraga off-leash pet ordinance is set for Town Council consideration on July 22nd.

Let me first say that I have always had a dog and probably always will. I am a push-over for dogs. But, my opinions are also formed, in part, by the fact that my niece was severely injured at age 3 when her otherwise friendly and gentle family dog attacked her. Nobody knows why.

Passage of the Moraga animal ordinance is a step in the right direction to prevent the inevitable tragedy of a dog out of control doing unintended injury to any of our precious children. My abiding fear is that on some lovely summer day, a group of toddlers will be picnicking at Rancho Laguna when some otherwise friendly, oafy, gentle but off-leash 80 pound Chocolate Lab will get a whiff of their tuna sandwiches, will decide he wants some, will charge into their midst and will do them harm -- not a mean dog but just a dog out of control and doing what dogs do.

The proposed animal ordinance will help to prevent what I believe is an inevitable consequence of mixing off-leash animals with children in our parks. We should not wait for the tragedy. Like almost every other municipality, we should take preventive action now.

Dogs belong in our parks, or in other public places, only if firmly leashed to their masters who are able to control them at all times. If people want to have their dogs run free, let them do it in their own yards or in a facility specifically set aside for the purpose, a fenced dog park.

I have heard many comments from parents that say they specifically avoid Rancho Laguna because it is known as the "dog park." What a tragedy it is to have this beautiful park go unused by people that find dogs threatening or unpleasant to be around.

Off-leash supporters have suggested that the answer may be to fence in the children at Rancho Laguna to protect them from the dogs. While creative, that idea is absurd, completely wrong-headed, a complete reversal of what we should value. Kids first, please.

The Moraga Town Council should give very strong consideration to Moraga Town Staff findings in relation to the off-leash per ordinance. In its report, Staff reviewed the approach of other local jurisdictions. I believe it says that no other jurisdiction permits co-use of parks for people and off-leash animals. That is the way it should be done in Moraga.

The right approach is to keep children and off-leash animals apart. Thus, I would support fencing in a dog play, exercise, and socialization area on public property, perhaps a portion of one of our parks. I'd use it with my dog and would help to raise funds to make it happen.

What we do not need is to wait for disaster to strike before we prevent the preventable.

Bob Reynolds - Long-time Moraga resident and Dog Lover

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