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## Town Loses Another Staffer

*Public Works' John Sherbert retires*

*By Sophie Braccini*

John Sherbert's last day as Staff Engineer in the Moraga Public Works Department was May 25. Sherbert retired after only five years in public service because his life has led him along many different paths. As he prepared to depart, he shared memories of achievement, of great camaraderie, of hard work, and a few concerns about the Town of Moraga.

He also proposed a somewhat unorthodox idea for how to reduce costs and overhead: consolidate all or part of the staff in Lamorinda.

Sherbert is the third person to leave Moraga's Public Works Department this year. Department head Jill Mercurio accepted a new job four months ago, and has not yet been replaced; inspector Dana Blatner left unexpectedly a few weeks ago.

"We are in the process of recruiting a replacement for Jill Mercurio," said Town Manager Jill Keimach. She added that she was expecting someone to start in that position this summer. In the interim, the Town is contracting with Contra Costa County for grading inspection (part of Blatner's job), Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram is picking up Public Works, and Rob Kalkbrenner has a contract as interim Town Engineer-he works two days a week.

Sherbert is witness to the consequences of having a very small staff, especially in view of mounting federal and state requirements. "We are so thin on staff that if someone leaves, it is hard to find anybody to pick up the slack," he said. He also thinks that a very small staff has to deal with so many aspects of the job that it can be at the expense of becoming very competent in any one area.

His solution would be to consolidate some, if not all, of the three Lamorinda municipal administrations. "There is potential for economy of scale," he said, "and it would increase local expertise because people would have the opportunity to specialize more." He added that the downside could be the loss of some local control. "But the costs are such that I would trade off local control for reducing costs," he said. As examples, he cited the Acalanes Union High School District that manages four high schools, and the Moraga Orinda Fire District. "There are issues and discussions, but at least we do not have to pay for two Fire Chiefs or three Superintendants," he concluded.

None of the local governments have publicly discussed the creation of a "Lamorinda staff," but at the last Tri-City meeting on February 15, the three Councils discussed working together to put joint transportation bids out to increase their bargaining power.

Sherbert said he had 5 very interesting years working in Moraga. He was recruited by Town Engineer and Public Works Director Jill Mercurio. "When I met with her, I shared my concerns over not being familiar with all of the aspects of the job," Sherbert recalled. "She looked at my resume and said, 'you should be able to handle what we are doing here.'"

Sherbert is an electrical engineer by training. He worked in the computer hardware and software engineering industry, before starting his own general contracting practice. But doing it alone was not his thing, and as a Moraga resident, when he read about the opening, he thought he could contribute to the Town in which he had raised two children. "I've loved the challenge and I've loved to learn," said Sherbert. "With the flexibility and support of my manager (Mercurio), it's been a wonderful experience."

"We've had some great accomplishments," he reminisced. First he started looking at the energy consumption of the Town, something that had never been done before. "When I saw that the energy grants were available and could help us reduce our energy bills, I immediately brought it to Jill (Mercurio)," he said. The rest is history: installation of led lights, replacement of old equipment that was energy-guzzling and insulation in divers public buildings were all conducted successfully. All these modifications translate today in dollars saved.

Sherbert added some of the Town's capital projects to his list of accomplishments. "The lights at Ascot went very well, as well as some of our pavement projects," he said. He also remembered those that didn't go so well, such as the resurfacing of Moraga Road that started to fail. "I'm just finishing the last paperwork on this project," he noted. Speaking of State Regulations...

How one unfunded mandate is affecting this small town

The failure of the 2012 Community Clean Water Initiative doesn't mean that requirements for communities to clean up storm drains will disappear-it means that municipalities will have to find other funds to pay for the clean-up. "The mandate stays the same," said Moraga Staff Engineer John Sherbert, "and the new costs will have to be covered by (the Town's) General Fund."

The California Regional Water Quality Control Board, San Francisco Bay Region, wants to improve the quality of the water in reservoirs and in the bay. Moraga's water run-off goes to the San Leandro Reservoir, which is a source of drinking water for a large part of the East Bay.

"Nobody would argue against clean water, but sometimes what we are asked to do is a little extreme," said Sherbert, who believes that it should not be "one rule fits all." For example, "We are required to have catchment devices in all of our storm drain entries, whether or not we have debris in our creeks," he explained.

Other requirements for clean water include holding three outreach events per year and sweeping the streets

frequently. "We do it (sweeping) only twice a year because there is no trash in our streets," said Sherbert. "And the Water Board says that we should do it every week, every other week, or every day."

Sherbert said that a 2012 clean-up of the creek banks near the high school collected one cubic foot of trash. "And part of that was a paper banner that had blown from Campo," he added. Sherbert was hoping that the agency, after seeing these results, would loosen the mandate for Moraga. "We hoped that reasonable people would allow an exception, because we are burning up local agency resources for no real gain," said Sherbert.

The expected cost to the Town this year, to comply with storm water regulations, is \$324,239 - a 78 percent increase from previous years.

Sherbert acknowledged that Moraga does pollute its creeks, but said the source of the pollution is run-off from gardens that contains pesticides and fertilizers, and the new law has no way to measure or improve that type of pollution.

"This is one of the most outrageous examples of unfunded mandates that our towns and cities have to abide by," said Sherbert. Non-compliance can result in fines of \$10,000 per day. S.Braccini

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