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It's Hard to Get a New Commercial Sign in Moraga

By *Sophie Braccini*

According to Nick Ghassem, the Town of Moraga has delayed for months the approval of his application for a new sign for the Valero gas station that sits at the southeast corner of the intersection of Moraga Road and Rheem Boulevard. The Planning Commission approved the plans for the gas station renovation in February. The Design Review Board subsequently decided to allow him to display only one sign bearing his gas prices-one that is significantly smaller than that of any other gas station in town: 30 square feet, compared to an average of 37.50 square feet for existing signs. Ghassem appealed to the Planning Commission, which denied the appeal July 16. Moraga's previous Planning Director tried fruitlessly to amend the sign ordinance a few years ago. The Planning Commission decided nonetheless to rely on the only existing text in Moraga that defines how businesses can advertise their services.

"We are not a policy-making body," said Planning Commission Chair Stacia Levenfeld. "We are here to interpret the code."

"This process has taken four months, during which I could not do any business," said Ghassem, who planned to open the new gas station, complete with mini-mart and car wash, in late June.

Ghassem indicated that he was ready to do everything else that the Design Review Board demanded of him. "We will paint the canopy and building trim in a dark gray color rather than the standard Valero bright teal, to be in keeping with the semi-rural character of the town," he said. He also agreed to have his sign lit with an exterior light rather than an interior one for esthetics. But requiring him to build a new smaller sign was, in his view, a lot for the Board to ask.

Resident Gordon Nathan spoke in favor of the applicant. "If everybody else has multiple signs, it seems to me that it would be only fair to give him the same opportunity to advertise in a very competitive market," he said. "In the name of fairness I hope that you would find it in your heart to cut him some slack."

Assistant Planner Kelly Suronen explained that the existing stations have signs that predate the sign ordinance and will have to follow the rules when they update their signs, but "this is an opportunity to bring signs into compliance and make them more semi-rural in character as the General Plan calls for," she said.

The Commissioners agreed and denied the appeal of the DRB decision. Decisions of the Planning Commission can be appealed to the Town Council.

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