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Three Seats, Five Candidates - Here's Your First Look

By Sophie Braccini

Lamorinda Weekly recently caught up with the five candidates who are running for three seats on the Moraga Town Council and asked a few questions (the candidates are presented here in alphabetical order).

Phillip Arth is a first-time Council candidate. He is a long-time Moraga resident and business owner. Until two years ago he ran a tax consulting firm, with his wife Gretchen, from his home. He raised three children in Moraga and has had the pleasure to see some of his eight grandchildren grow up in town as well. Arth wants now to give back to his community. "I want to bring my financial expertise to the Town," he said. He is past president of Moraga Movers and a past Big SIR of Sons In Retirement. He was recently appointed to the Town's Audit and Finance Committee.

"The town is well managed and there is not much room for additional savings," said Arth, "but I think that it would be a good idea to have a CPA on the Council." He believes that his accountant approach and critical thinking will be beneficial. He supports Measure K, the Town's one percent sales tax residents will vote on in November. "The sales tax will give us enough to maintain our roads, but we need more to compensate for the delayed maintenance," said Arth. His primary mission, if elected, will be to start to work on a parcel tax for the roads, starting with understanding which residents do not support the idea and reaching out to them.

Land use is Arth's other motivation. "I was a MOSO supporter," he said, "but I'm not an isolationist who would want to stop anyone from coming to Moraga. We need to have some wiggle room in our code." Arth admitted that he has not studied all the issues in detail yet, but he thinks that the decision on the Hetfield property to allow six new homes to be built was a good one.

Another land use issue that Arth wants to have an impact on is winemaking. "We need regulation for that activity," he said. "This is great as a hobby, for personal consumption, but not for commercial use." Arth thinks that the size of the vineyards should be limited, that the creation of an AVA (American Viticultural Area) for Lamorinda is not a good idea, and that the Pear Festival should not have added "Wine" to its name. "People with large vineyards spray their grapes, they wear suits to do so, and it is a nuisance to their neighbors," he added.

Arth has followed Moraga's political stories quite closely, he even went to Rancho Laguna Park to meet the dog owners and forge his own opinion. "I was impressed, they are a very conscientious group," he said, "but I need to research more." Arth says that he would never bring his grandchildren to a park if dog waste was present and he favors the idea of a fenced park, possibly including a specific area for small dogs.

Seth Freeman is running for Council for the second time. He was not elected two years ago. Freeman is the CEO of an emerging markets investment management, mutual fund and restructuring company headquartered in Moraga, with staff in Hong Kong, Singapore, India, China and Vietnam. He holds an M.B.A. from Thunderbird School of Global Management; a B.A. in Management from Saint Mary's and is a Certified Insolvency and Restructuring Advisor.

"We need to have the entrepreneurial approach on the Council," said Freeman. Unlike his opponents, Freeman believes that the Town is not well managed and that savings could be made. "The Council recently hired new managers and directors without taking that opportunity to hire qualified people who would work for less, or change the pension plans," said Freeman noting that in Lafayette city employees are part of a 401K plan, not a pension. Freeman has an extensive list of what he believes is Town waste. "The Council gave the Town Manager a \$50,000 discretionary budget two years ago, this is a typical trick of mismanagement," said Freeman (Town Manager Jill Keimach indicated that about \$20,000 of the fund called Community Contingency has been used this year, and that the balance will go back to the General Fund).

The handling of the Rancho Laguna Park issue also shows, in Freeman's view, how the Council wastes public money. "This was not even an issue listed in the Town's priorities at the beginning of the year," he says, "but over the last 18 months some \$100,000 has been spent in unnecessary legal and consultant fees."

Freeman says that, if elected, he will take an entrepreneurial approach to costs, reassess benefits and salaries, and reevaluate priorities. "I believe we could save about \$200,000 per year," he said. Some of Freeman's priorities are services for seniors and teens. "It is unacceptable that the Town refused \$3,000 to the Spirit Van when it wastes thousands otherwise," he said. Freeman adds that he would like to see a private/public partnership to create a teen center in Moraga.

Freeman believes that the current rules protecting open space are good, and that there is a fine line between diminishing a property owner's rights and protecting the community's values.

Freeman supports Measure K, "because the roads need it," he said. However, he does not have confidence in the incumbents' ability to manage this revenue. "The incumbents who were in power are the ones who failed to act when their engineers warned them in 2007 and 2009," he said. "There should be an independent board of trustees to manage this money."

Another big issue for Freeman is transparent democracy and how technology should be used to provide live video streaming of public meetings. He added that he'd like to see free Wi-Fi in the parks, coupled with cameras for safety reasons.

"There are many underutilized assets in this town," concludes Freeman. "Students could get valuable skills doing research for the town, the band shell in the Commons and the amphitheater at Rancho Laguna are under-utilized and could offer more music and plays that would raise Moraga's cultural level."

Karen Mendonca is running for a second term on the Council. She has lived in Moraga for 17 years. Most of her

career was devoted to administration and counseling in higher education. In her last position, she served as vice president of student affairs, and took early retirement at age 51. Mendonca has also served in Parks and Recreation. She is proud of the Council's achievements in the last four years that include fiscal responsibility, economic development, enhancement of the relationship with Saint Mary's College, the improvement of the Camino Pablo School field, and the successful hiring of a very talented town manager. "One of my favorite accomplishments in 2011 was the founding of the monthly 'Ask the Mayor and Town Manager' open, public meetings at Terzetto Cuisine," she noted.

In the next 4 years, Mendonca would like to see the sales tax (Measure K) pass to begin to address the town's infrastructure needs. "If the sales tax measure is approved, we should be able to see dramatic and ongoing improvements in the Town of Moraga," she said.

Mendonca ran a pro-open space campaign and then supported the Rancho Laguna Development project that allows construction on a minor ridge line. "I do not see a contradiction," she said. "I vigorously campaigned for Measure K (MOSO 2008) in the last election. I had hoped that it would have been supported by a majority of Moraga voters, but it was not. I told supporters at that time, if Measure K failed and I was elected, I would use our current General Plan when making land use decisions. It is the ethical and legal approach to making fair decisions." The General Plan will be reviewed in the coming years and Mendonca said she's looking forward to the opportunity to determine whether the current General Plan is adequate in its current guidelines.

She added that it is the responsibility of all members of the Moraga Town Council to make land use decisions that are fair and in the best interest of the Town of Moraga. These principles also guided her in her approach to the issue of off-leash dogs at Rancho Laguna Park.

"Parks are meant to be shared by all," she said. "After more than three years of dedicated work by the Park and Recreation Commission and Town staff, and after more than 40 public hearings, meetings, and opportunities for input, it is very disappointing that a final agreement respectful of the widely diverse needs of all our citizens was unable to be reached." For the future of the park, Mendonca said she will listen to citizens to see if there is an interest in maximizing access and safety for all users of Rancho Laguna Park.

Winemaking will also be looked at in the coming year. "It can be a very positive part of our community," she said, "and the Town is already in discussions with wine producers and neighbors in order to identify collaborative solutions to concerns such as commercial truck activity, public events, and commercial sales."

Mike Metcalf is currently serving as Moraga's mayor, and has held a seat on the Council for eight years. Metcalf is a member of Kiwanis and served on the Planning Commission; the former Chevron engineer derives a pride of achievement from local service.

Metcalf's main focus over the past 4 years has been the infrastructure. He was part of the committees that analyzed the state of the town's roads and is a strong supporter of Measure K. "We need to get things done," he said. "The yield of the measure will be less than what we need, but it will stop the bleed." Metcalf understands that some residents are concerned the money could be spent on other things. "The plan is to bond some of the revenue stream up to \$7.1 million," he said. "That will be used to start the work that needs to be done. About half of the sales tax will serve that debt; the other half will be at the discretion of the Town Council." Metcalf says that surveys have shown that the top 5 priorities of residents are linked to infrastructure. "What Council in its right mind would spend that money on anything other than infrastructure?" he asked. He added that the ordinance requires establishing a volunteer citizens' oversight committee.

Metcalf was involved in the Rancho Laguna Park and off-leash dog issue. "There was no consensus on the Council and some people dug their heels into the sand," he said. "We need to put this question to rest. The town is tearing itself apart over this and there are more important issues to look at." Like the rest of the current Council, he supports the construction of a spatial separation between off-leash dogs and other park users.

Metcalf presents himself as supportive of minimal government and believes that the Town works amazingly well with a very frugal budget. "We budget with a little bit of cushion," explained Metcalf. "Our sales tax revenues have increased, and we've lowered expenditure by delaying some rehiring." He added that pensions and health plans are at a minimum.

Metcalf's position on protecting open space in Moraga is that the General Plan as it stands now is not enough. "The General Plan has served the Town well," said Metcalf. "The text is not ironclad and that would be the wrong approach, you need to have discretion. It's not the text that provides the regulation, it's the process, and that is what public participation is all about."

For the next 4 years Metcalf said he would love to continue to work with the top notch staff Moraga is lucky to have. He expects the relationship with Saint Mary's College to continue to improve for added synergy and rejoices that staff will soon vacate the Hacienda for 329 Rheem. He will also continue to work with the School District to improve the availability of sports fields.

Roger Wykle has served on the Planning Commission for the last two years. Wykle joined the Coast Guard Academy when he was 18 years old. After graduating, he served as an officer in Louisiana, Hawaii, California, and abroad for 21 years. While in service he earned a masters degree in civil engineering. He and his wife chose to move to Moraga in 2008 to raise their children.

After he retired from the Coast Guard in 2009, Wykle went to work for a general contractor before starting his own general contracting company, Sustainable Group. He specializes in green construction and other federal projects. Community service has been in Wykle's life since he served as a volunteer fireman at 16; he said he always volunteers where he lives. His first big case on the Planning Commission was the Dollar Tree. Wykle tried to find arguments in the code to stop the store. "Some good still came from that decision," he said. "Kimco listened to the community; we now have a nice produce market, Tangelo's, and an Indian restaurant. Moraga deserves better than to be the discount shopping center of the East Bay."

Wykle says he is now running for the Council because of the decision that was made regarding the Hetfield estate

(the building of 6 new homes). "The General Plan directs to preserve open space to the maximum extent possible," said Wykle. "Hetfield was in MOSO space, in a high risk area prone to landslides. The implementation of the guidance says that if high risk is mitigated, development can occur, but there is no parameter to define the extent of what that mitigation can be." He added that for Hetfield, the mitigation will require the moving the equivalent of 50,000 truckloads of dirt. Wykle would like to participate in the amendment of the General Plan so that open space will, in his view, be really protected.

As a civil engineer, Wykle does not like deferred maintenance that increases costs exponentially. "Nobody wants to pay more tax," said Wykle, "but I am supportive of the 1 percent sales tax, this is a step in the right direction." Wykle thinks that so far the Town has done well to balance its operational budget. He added that, as a rule, he does not like debt and prefers to control expenses.

As far as Rancho Laguna Park and off-leash activities are concerned, Wykle believes that the park was working fine for years. "What was broken there that we needed to fix?" he asked. He said he is in favors of administrative control, such as tightening up the times and news signs, rather than engineering control, such as a fenced dog park.

"I truly respect public input and comments. We need to meaningfully value and treat the people with a high degree of respect," he concluded, "I also learned to be diplomatic and built consensus during my years in the Coast Guard. I will bring those skills to the Council."

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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