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Moraga Housing Element: Staying the Course

By Sophie Braccini

Four years ago Moraga was one of the first Bay Area cities to get its Housing Element approved by the state. Now entering the next cycle, the town is required to plan for building slightly fewer new homes and need make only minor adjustments to the existing plan and move it forward. As part of the process the town will conduct public outreach to ensure that its Housing Element meets the needs of all segments of the population. The issue does not elicit as much passion in Moraga as it does in other jurisdictions, but as in most cities, two groups oppose each other - one wants more low income housing and the other does not want to see more development. At a recent meeting, both groups expressed their different views but shared common concerns over traffic and emergency operations.

"We are here tonight to hear from you," said Chelsey Norton, a project manager with the consulting firm Mintier Harnish, at a public meeting May 22. She introduced the plan that should not vary much from the one approved in 2010, since Moraga is now required to plan for 229 units instead of 234, and the Moraga Center Specific plan alone is zoned to accommodate more than 600 new homes/condominiums.

California plans for future housing needs and trickles down the figures to each city with a number of housing units to be planned for within eight years. For the Bay Area, the projected need is 187,990 new units, which translates into 229 in Moraga; of these, 119 should be planned for lower income residents. Since cities don't build, the requirement is just to plan for these units, and affordability is measured by a density of at least 20 dwelling units per acre.

At the meeting, some residents said that housing for local workforce, students and lower income seniors should be built, while others indicated that they did not want to see growth in Moraga. The latter group shared the same concerns that were raised in 2009, when the Moraga Center Specific Plan and the Housing Element were discussed and approved: Will building hundreds of new units worsen traffic conditions? Do local schools have the capacity for so many new children? Moraga is a very slow growth community that does not want to become Lafayette or Walnut Creek - could "over-building" forever alter the character of the town?

Planning Director Shawna Brekke-Read confirmed that the town has no latitude to negotiate the number of units for which it must plan. Resident Denise Coane, who is concerned by the large number of projects now in the development pipeline, proposed to enact a rule that would limit the number of projects approved each year. Brekke-Read did not comment on the legality of such a rule, but noted that things are already pretty slow in Moraga. Palos Colorados, for example, has been in the works for over 20 years; Rancho Laguna II and Hetfield for nine - and none of them has broken ground yet.

Residents who believe that more affordable housing is needed were asked for solutions to make it happen. "One way is subsidizing the land cost," suggested Sam Sperry, a recently retired municipal bond attorney. "Usually this is done by non-profit groups; another way is to increase density, so you get more units for a given piece of land."

Creative solutions were proposed by the group, such as encouraging Moraga businesses to hire from the local workforce and adding more fire stations. Public transportation was a popular discussion topic and Brekke-Read said that a tri-city Lamorinda shuttle study will be underway soon - a request for proposal has been issued for a consultant to determine how such a shuttle might work, if people would really ride it, and how much it would cost.

Next steps to finish Moraga's Housing Element include discussion by the Planning Commission and Town Council; staff will submit Moraga's file early next year.

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