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Paradigm Shift for Hacienda de las Flores

By Sophie Braccini

The historic Hacienda de las Flores held the Moraga Town Council's attention on Nov. 18 when the financial report on the town's cost to maintain the beautiful buildings and grounds was on the agenda - along with a vision-altering plan presented by resident Joao Magalhaes to transform the charming property into a world class leisure public/private facility. It was not the first time the retired Bechtel executive has suggested that the town kick it up a notch when it projects itself into the future, but it was the first time that the council embraced the idea and decided to move forward.

The plan has enough bells and whistles to dazzle anyone. It focuses on expanding the utilization of the Hacienda and increasing revenues, while preserving the building's historical value. Magalhaes believes that harnessing the professionalism and capitalistic energy of world class architects and operators in a public/private partnership could transform the Hacienda de las Flores into an attractive facility that would draw more people to Moraga while continuing to serve residents. According to Magalhaes, the Hacienda of the future could include new classrooms, event venues and a multigenerational community center for the town; and space leased to a private partner could end up as a bed and breakfast/restaurant, a tea room/library, a swimming pool/spa at the Pavilion, and a wine cave/cellar for rehearsal dinners. His financial analysis leads him to believe that the facility would produce half a million dollars in revenue per year that would be split between the town and its partner.

For the Moraga resident who says that all he wants is to see our little town flourish, the most important thing at this time is the selection of a first class architecture firm that will have the vision and the connections to create something special in Moraga.

As Councilmember Mike Metcalf noted, the town has operated the Hacienda at a loss for several years and the structure is in need of major repairs. Although the Hacienda Foundation has done a lot to maintain and improve the facility, much work remains; so Metcalf welcomed Magalhaes' proposal to change the way things are done.

Councilmember Dave Trotter and vice mayor Roger Wykle both predicted that the interface between the private and public future use of the building would be the most challenging articulation to plan. Members of the Hacienda Foundation who were present at the meeting all confirmed that they wholeheartedly support Magalhaes' approach and its objective to expand utilization and generate revenues. Town staff also recommended moving forward with the first phase, including issuing a Request for Qualifications for architectural firms to prepare conceptual plans for the best use of the property. This phase will cost the town only staff time. Council members asked to see the RFQ before it is sent out, because they want to make sure that the terms are open enough to let creative juices flow. Staff expects to have a draft ready in February.

Even if everything runs smoothly, it is likely that the project will generate a lot of public debate when the preliminary concepts are designed, when the analysis to confirm the viability of the concept is considered, and when potential end-operators are selected. In the meantime, and to improve revenues now, staff proposed to extend the hours of operation for weddings to 10 p.m., since closing at 9 p.m. seems to be the reason many rental opportunities are lost; and to reconsider the rule that prohibits hard alcohol on the premises. These measures will be brought back at a future council meeting; neighbors will be duly notified.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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