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## Plans to open La Finestra Restaurant at the Hacienda move forward

By Sophie Braccini



Jeff Assadi dreams of the Hacienda de las Flores  
 Photo provided

restaurant. Instead the committee decided to forgo the RFP and asked the town to start negotiating with Assadi.

Korpus asked for some explanation. Wendy Scheck, Moraga resident, member of the committee and publisher of Lamorinda Weekly, explained that the committee had completed the drafting of the RFP with then interim parks and recreation director Carlene McCart, when Assadi walked in the door. At first the committee told him that the RFP was going to be approved by the council and that he could respond to it at that time. But then Assadi explained that his window to engage in a new restaurant operation was about to expire.

Scheck remembered how Assadi's offer perfectly aligned with everything that was included in the RFP: a restaurateur with experience running a successful restaurant for more than five years, also experienced in catering, with cash in hand to invest in a new location, offering a market rate rent and shared profits on all revenues including catering. Additionally, restaurant consultant and Lafayette resident Bob Burke had warned the committee that finding a lease that would not require the town to make major investment to improve the building and the kitchen was unlikely.

What made Assadi's offer a perfectly timed one comes from the unfortunate fire that completely destroyed the building where La Finestra had operated for the last 15 years on Lafayette Circle last July. The restaurateur now has the insurance money as well as a full wine, beer and liquor license that needs to find a location before it expires.

Joao Magalhaes, who was also on the committee and has been advocating for a public-private partnership to develop the Hacienda for four years, explained that the only investment required from the town - an ADA bathroom on the ground floor for \$50,000 - was a bargain compared to the quarter million dollars the Hacienda has been costing the town yearly in maintenance and operating cost.

The new parks and recreation director, Breyana Brandt, explained she was confident that the wedding activity that had been the largest source of revenue for the Hacienda could continue at the Pavilion location. Her department would remain on the ground floor of the Hacienda, the restaurant would only use half, and La Sala and the Casita would be used for recreation classes. The garden room and mosaic room would still be available for community meetings. The restaurant would take over the kitchen, which Assadi would bring up to code and make ready to handle restaurant operations as well as catering, as well as the fireside room, the dance room, which could be converted into a bar, and the courtyard for outside dining.

Cynthia Battenberg, town manager, indicated that in her previous position as development manager for the town of San Leandro she had been in touch with Lafayette commercial real estate professionals at Main Street Property and that their opinion of the rent offered by Assadi was in line with Lamorinda prices.

Korpus indicated that she now understood how things developed and agreed that proceeding with lease negotiation was an opportunity the town should not miss. The rest of the council agreed.

A lease proposal should come back to council for final agreement in May. Assadi will not be able to open the restaurant before November because weddings have already been booked until then with a promise to have

Despite a somewhat confusing process, the town council approved authorizing the town manager to enter lease negotiations to rent the Hacienda de las Flores to restaurant operator Jeff Assadi. The opportunity appears to be a perfect situation to finally make the town-owned park an open amenity for the entire community, as well as less of a cost center. If everything goes according to plan, the new La Finestra Restaurant should open in early November.

At the April 17 special meeting, members of the subcommittee that proposed the lease were quizzed, especially by Council Member Kymberleigh Korpus, who said she had first thought that the committee had exceeded its mandate. The group composed of Moraga residents, staff members and two council members had been tasked to develop a request for proposals that the town would approve and send to the market to get different offers to rent part of the historic building to a

exclusive use of the facility.

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