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Hacienda noise mitigation strategies re-examined

By Vera Kochan

Residents in the immediate vicinity of the Hacienda de Las Flores (2100 Donald Dr, Moraga) had experienced over a year of event-free quiet during the COVID-19 mandates for large gatherings. Now that many restrictions have been lifted for large social events, noise from weddings and other sizable parties are disrupting the short-lived tranquility that locals have grown to enjoy.

The Parks and Recreation Department is doing its best to address the recent complaints by implementing noise mitigation strategies before Wedgewood Weddings, an event venue operator, takes over the Hacienda's event operations on Nov. 8.

This past summer, an overabundance of events averaging 100-150 people took place on the grounds. The usual DJ that operated through Parks and Rec had closed its business leaving the door open for bands or a variety of DJs who didn't observe noise regulations. This behavior forced neighbors to make complaint calls to the Moraga Police Department. In order to release MPD from investigating these complaints, staff hired a private security firm to monitor and enforce the noise regulations.

A staff report, presented during the town council's Sept. 22 meeting by Parks and Rec Director Breyana Brandt stated, "Noise at the Hacienda is unique and complex as the style of music, equipment used, and set-up is different for all events. The nuance of how sound travels is based upon numerous changing factors including: i) the location of the event (Hacienda or Pavilion); ii) whether the event is indoors or outdoors; iii) the type of music (band, DJ microphone, choir, or other); iv) the style of music; v) the type of sound equipment; and vi) the configuration of the equipment set-up."

In July, the town hired Environmental Consulting Services, a company known for providing noise mitigation solutions for cities and counties. At a cost of \$2,700 they studied the situation and made suggestions regarding the sound system's set-up, volume, frequency and control, along with using temporary barriers around the music system. The town also implemented new sound agreements that DJs had to sign prior to a scheduled event, but the agreements were often violated. A community discussion near the end of the month revealed that few residents expected anything better once Wedgewood took over the events.

In an attempt to mitigate the noise emanating from the Hacienda, staff strategically positioned speakers to direct noise away from neighboring properties; purchased portable acoustic panels (\$1,400) to buffer the sound emitted from behind the speakers; implemented non-compliance noise security deposits; and contracted for the use of former police and military personnel as security to monitor and enforce noise thresholds (\$78/hour).

One of the largest debates centers around appropriate decibel levels. "Based upon the sound readings gathered and input from the community, staff implemented a threshold of 75 to 80 dB at the music source which results in a 65 dB or lower reading at the property line," explained Brandt. "The security guards ensure that the threshold is maintained on the dance floor or six feet from the speakers. Sporadic claps and cheers may spike the decibel level slightly higher, but these spikes are not related to the music and not sustained throughout the event."

By the end of August, security guards began collecting decibel readings from five locations on the property every 30 minutes. After seven events and 211 decibel readings, an analysis of the information was used to further determine the best possible solutions. As such, all live music (small acoustic bands only) have been relocated to indoor status, the Pavilion is relegated to a ceremony only location; and all DJs will be set up inside the Fireside Room with dancing allowed on the interior fountain patio. Wedgewood has inherited 25 events that will occur between March and June 2022 under the existing policy. They have agreed to comply with the new changes beginning July 2022.

Approximately \$20,000 of the current strategy costs will be paid through the Hacienda Events and Rentals budget for Contract Services. The expense will be addressed during the Mid-Year Budget Update.

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