

# Moraga examines economic vitality, contrasts with Lafayette and Orinda

By Lou Fancher

A Draft General Plan Economic Vitality White Paper and proposed economic development policies prepared for Moraga's General Plan 2040 offers valuable information specific to the town, as well as intriguing comparisons to Lafayette and Orinda. Dated March 20 and submitted by Planning Director Afshan Hamid and consultant Barry Miller to the town council and planning commission, staff sought input and feedback on the report. State law dictates mandatory elements and requires updates for all municipal General Plans, along with allowing for the addition of "optional" components, such as the economic vitality overview Moraga's planners developed in response to key priorities expressed in a resident survey the town completed during the sixth cycle Housing Element process.

As stated, the White Paper holds vital information and warrants close reading by the town's members with stake in the game: Moraga residents, workers, employers, business owners, commercial and residential property owners, town government officials, and others. For purposes of this article, the lens widens to draw out a few of the comparisons the report makes between Moraga and its two neighboring Lamorinda cities. The information the White

Paper's data and narrative highlight when noting the important contrasts and similarities throughout the region can be extrapolated and used beyond the town's geographic borders.

Beginning with sales tax revenues per capita, the report shows the decline in the last seven years is common to Moraga, Lafayette, and Orinda. The report breaks down sales tax revenues in Moraga and shows that relative to Lafayette and Orinda, Moraga receives much less of its sales tax from food and beverage stores and restaurants, and more from clothing/accessories and gasoline stations.

Moraga gathered data from EnviroNics Analytics pertaining to "retail leakage" based on modeling consumer behavior and estimating the gap between retail supply and demand in given marketplaces. Comparisons showed all three communities could conceivably support more retail activity and are "leaking" retail spending to other cities. In Lamorinda, Orinda is capturing the smallest share of local spending (26%), followed by Moraga (33%) and Lafayette (45%). In terms of volume, the greatest leakage gaps are in motor vehicle and parts dealers, food and beverage stores, general merchandise, and food service and drinking places. The data is most useful

in revealing sectors where expansion would mirror locational needs of businesses in that town or city and logically, might indicate the most successful ventures.

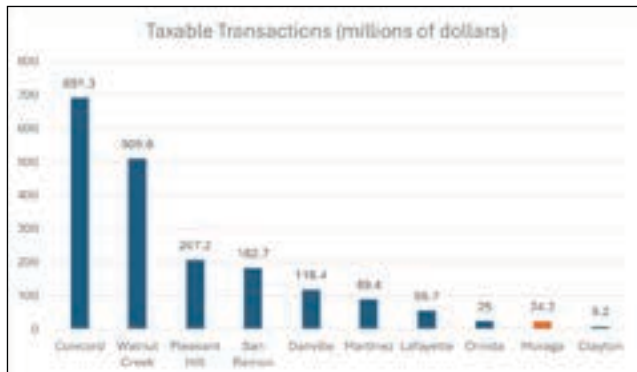
Another category, median household income in 2022, establishes Moraga at \$193,707, Lafayette higher at \$219,250 and Orinda rising to the top position at over \$250,000. "Collectively, the three cities have roughly 60,000 residents and form one of the East Bay's Area's most affluent submarkets," the report states. About the cost of residential property, it says, "Home prices in Moraga are among the highest in Contra Costa County, though they lag Orinda and Lafayette slightly. Zillow reports the average sales price in 2023 was \$1,696,000 in Moraga, \$1,843,710 in Lafayette, and \$1,936,485 in Orinda. All of these figures are more than twice the countywide average of \$793,190."

The White Paper has an extensive examination of commercial property profiles and emphasizes the necessity of a town or city to support investors, developers, owners and tenants with issues such as financing, permitting, dealing with aging infrastructure, establishing utility connections,

and more. Placemaking and storytelling enter the picture upon inviting residents to offer input on the priorities unique to the community. Because Moraga is geographically more isolated than Lafayette and Orinda and is not on the BART line, for example, certain services are more or less in demand. With their more direct access, Lamorinda's two cities might consider commercial development projects with specific appeal centered on a different demographic baseline than Moraga planners utilize.

The report ends with outlines for five goals and specific policies aimed at raising the economic vitality of Moraga. Again, the items stand as strong recommendations for any community aspiring to improve and stabilize its economic base in 2024 and beyond. The five goals are for Moraga, but adding "Lafayette" and "Orinda" to each phrase could form a blueprint for the entire Lamorinda community:

1. Maintain a business-friendly environment



that supports investment in Moraga.

2. Attract new businesses that meet the needs of Moraga residents and enhance the town's character.
3. Strengthen Moraga's identity as a college town. (Lafayette and Orinda could use their city's prominent feature and identity as a substi-

tute for Moraga's Saint Mary's College-based designation.)

4. Modernize Moraga's two commercial districts so that they become more vibrant town centers and gathering places.
5. Promote Moraga's fiscal stability and capacity to provide essential services and infrastructure.

Comparative Data on Retail Rents in Moraga and Nearby Markets

	Moraga	Orinda	Lafayette	Walnut Creek	Danville	Concord
Avg Asking Rent/SF Q4, 2013	\$1.59	\$2.25	\$3.15	\$3.28	\$2.64	\$1.57
Avg Asking Rent/SF Q4, 2022	\$3.76	\$3.01	\$3.24	\$3.42	\$3.60	\$1.71
Avg Asking Rent/SF Q4, 2023	\$2.50	\$2.35	\$3.67	\$3.56	\$3.72	\$1.99
% change, 10 years	57.2%	4.4%	16.5%	8.5%	40.9%	26.8%
% change, 1 year	-33.5%	-21.9%	13.3%	4.1%	3.3%	16.4%

To read the full report, visit [www.moraga.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/8655/FINAL-PACKET---3-A---ECON-VITALITY-STUDY-SESSION](http://www.moraga.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/8655/FINAL-PACKET---3-A---ECON-VITALITY-STUDY-SESSION)

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## Protests at Lafayette Elementary School spark controversy

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Ignoring the protests, he implied, would not result in the protesters giving up their activities. Having checked in with the school district to ask for their position, he called school district policy "faulty and fundamentally broken and ineffective." He called for "deeds and words from the council to take a stand."

Council member Susan Candell asked when the protesters are at LES. Cowger said protesters arrive approximately 30 minutes before the school children arrive, remain for several hours, leave for a short time midday, then come back after a lunch break. Candell asked if children have to walk around them on the the sidewalks or if protesters blocked traffic at road

intersections. Cowger has taken videos and has asked protesters to move aside. She noted they did comply with her requests to move, "But I'm an adult," she emphasized.

Council member Karl Anduri asked for more specificity as to times and the name of the group supporting the protesters. Cowger said during the last two weeks protesters have been in position at 8 a.m. and typically stay until the end of drop-off time. With increasing regularity, they have returned in the afternoons at 2:15 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, and 1:15 p.m. on Wednesdays when pick-up time is one hour earlier.

With public comments on the local concerns received, the matter returned to the coun-

cil. Mayor Gina Dawson spoke to Lafayette's position and said, "Of course, we welcome children, adults, whoever...everyone here. That's a statement I can say. We do strive to be inclusive and I know we do not condone the message of these demonstrations and we don't agree with them. What we can do—and I understand that vice mayor Kwok will be meeting with you Nikki (Cowger) tomorrow with some more representatives so we can hear more about your ideas. We have also worked with our police chief and I have reached out to the superintendent of the Lafayette School District to get more information."

Dawson said city manager Niroop Srivatsa would also be involved in the meetings and that allowing and responding

to the protests is "an education process and also, a protection of first amendment rights. These demonstrators are on public property. They are not allowed on the school (property) and they're being very careful of that while the children are in place. And they can actually hand things to the children, so it's one of these things where we do need to help make sure that the school district is helping to educate about what is not acceptable and help protect the kids." She said the council looks forward to following up on the speakers' ideas and appreciates their input. "We do strive to be inclusive and make sure people will feel welcome and safe. Thank you for coming out and expressing these concerns to us. It's important."

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## Magical Monarchs

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The JM staff judged the initial entries, sending the top finalists for each category on to the town's Art and Public Spaces Committee for a final decision. The judging criteria was based on the poster's "creativity and ability to convey the need for locals to support monarch butterflies."

Event organizers Julie Stagg from the Moraga Garden Club, and Holly Hartz and Suzanne d'Arcy from Moraga's Art in Public Spaces Committee, held the April 16, Magical Monarch Mini Poster Gallery Showing and Artists' Reception at the Moraga Public Library,

where the 16 posters will be on display through the month of April. During that time, a sign featuring the winning posters, as well as portions of the other entries, will be on display in front of the Rancho Laguna Park's monarch garden.

Winners of the art poster, Naomi Lee (11) and Gabrielle Lee (12) -- no relation -- stated, "We had the option to do visual arts or poetry, and we chose art. It had to have monarchs and had to convey the value of them."

Poetry poster winner, Abbie Cunningham (12) said, "I like butterflies and art, and I wanted to participate." Cunningham was sur-

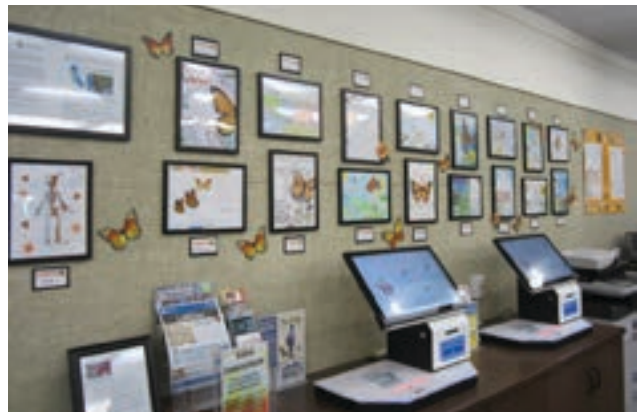


Photo Vera Kochan

Monarch Poster Contest finalists' work on display at Moraga Library

prised to have won, but admitted that no one else turned in a poetry-based poster. Nevertheless, she went the extra mile by adding artwork to her verses.

After a few speeches, one of which was given by Mayor Teresa Onoda, who said, "The future is

a canvas waiting to be painted with hope", the 16 finalists were all given monarch butterfly stickers, key chains, and Certificates of Appreciation, which were accompanied by applause from proud family members and well-wishers alike.