



MORAGA

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Moraga School District Board has three candidates vying for two open positions

By Vera Kochan



Stephanie Dickerson



Lee Hays



Gian Panetta

Photos courtesy Moraga Citizens Network

On Oct. 10, The Moraga Citizens Network (MCN) held their tenth Candidates Night. This year, the event was held at Saint Mary's College, and was moderated by the school's provost, Dr. Corey Cook. The crowd size was relatively good despite the constant humorous references pointing out the event's competition for viewership with the San Francisco 49ers football game that evening.

First on the agenda was an introduction of Moraga's three, newly-appointed town council members, Brian Dolan, Lisa Maglio, and Graham Thiel, who then answered questions posed by Cook. An article entailing that portion of the event will appear in a future Lamorinda Weekly issue.

After a brief inter-

mission, the three candidates running to fill two available seats on the Moraga School District Board were introduced to the attendees: Stephanie Dickerson, Gian Panetta, and Lee Hays. Each candidate responded to the same six questions previously submitted to MCN by Moraga residents.

Dickerson, a 14-year Moraga resident with two children in the school system, believes that "MSD has an obligation to ensure that a quality education is provided to every student. This extends to maintaining school safety, fostering healthy learning environments, thoughtfully appropriating funds, and ensuring a strong curriculum."

Panetta grew up in Moraga and experienced first-hand the benefits of

an education via the MSD's Learning Center Program. "I understand the challenges faced by students with learning disabilities in Moraga's education system. I am committed to addressing these challenges. A board that comprehends these issues is crucial to ensure that no child is left behind."

Hays is a 25-year resident whose three children grew up in Moraga and attended the local schools. "I'm committed to preserving and enhancing the high-quality education that makes Moraga a top choice for families. My goal is to work collaboratively with fellow board members, educators, parents, and the community to address challenges, capitalize on opportunities, and maintain the standard of excellence that

defines Moraga's schools."

The first question of the evening was: What is your understanding of the role and responsibilities of a school board member, and what would you do to be an effective trustee?

Hays feels that it's important to retain outstanding teachers and oversee the superintendent. He spoke of upcoming financial budget shortfalls as being a challenge, but with his construction background, he feels he has the skills to guide the MSD through the recent Bond Measure D's capital improvement projects.

Panetta addressed the reading curriculum in that it's important to ensure that goals established at the beginning of the year are being met, with any necessary adjustments made along the way.

Agreeing with her opponents' responses, Dickerson added the importance of handling the schools and community in the best way possible, while being a collaborative board member. She values her abilities as a good listener when coming to the table to make constructive decisions.

The second question was: Identify one or two important issues facing the Moraga School District, and explain how

you would like the district to address them?

Phones in schools are a problem, stated Panetta. He believes that cyber-bullying through social media is a big cause of mental health issues, especially for girls. Curtailling the use of phones in schools would be a step in the right direction. He also stated that it's important to continue to find funding for the schools, which is difficult when you live in an affluent area.

Dickerson's concerns are with the budgetary issues facing the MSD and where best to put the resources. The schools need upgrading, and Measure D funds must be spent wisely.

Agreeing with both Panetta and Dickerson, Hays also feels strongly about the budget and its importance in retaining the best teachers possible – they are a big reason why the schools are successful in luring families to Moraga. He's also concerned about the schools' aging infrastructure and the need for repairs, and hopes the Measure D funds will be put to careful use.

Question number three asked: School safety is a topic of increased concern nationally.

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Rheem Elementary kicks off its first California Crunch Day

By Vera Kochan

The Community Alliance with Family Farmers sponsored its ninth Annual California Crunch at noon on Oct. 10. The statewide event encouraged schools to "take one big collective bite of locally-grown fruits and vegetables to celebrate local farms and healthy eating." One such school to participate for the first time was Donald L. Rheem Elementary.

The event was also a celebration of Farm-to-School Month. Last year's statewide effort included over 50 school districts that reached over 650,000 students.

According to Food and Nutrition Services Coordinator for the Moraga School District Selma Mirante, "We will feature rainbow carrots, corn on the cob, and cauliflower for our students

to crunch." Other items in the cafeteria's salad bar included cucumbers, strawberries, cherry tomatoes, grapes, unpeeled bananas, and packaged applesauce.

In 2022, California became the first state to enact the Universal Meals Program, whereby the elementary schools provide students with not only a free breakfast, but free lunch as well. "The state had a 'kit fund' grant that provided schools with ovens, warmers, freezers, and refrigerators," explained Mirante. "We don't have a stove. Most schools in Lamorinda do not. We learned as we were going along, and a lot of the food we serve is made from scratch, like today's pasta and sauces. We also have a contract with Sodexo US."



Rheem students enjoy the salad bar. Photo Vera Kochan

Rheem's menu changes regularly to give the kids variety, and popular dishes will see a return. "We make certain that the kids eat a fruit or vegetable, and they can go to the salad bar as often as they want," Mirante said. "The California Department of Education Universal Meals Program is what we participate in, and there are rules for compliant meals."

Operations Manager Rezika Begriche explained, "We put out whatever the harvest of the month is. We've also included romaine lettuce and last time was watermelon." She monitors the salad bar and tries to encourage the kids to go for the not-so-popular choices like carrots and cauliflower.

At Rheem, the students enter the cafeteria in timed shifts. Grades K - 1 are first; then 2 - 3; followed by 4 - 5; and finally the TKs come last. Principal Brian Sullivan explained that any of the foods not eaten are composted in order to help reduce waste. The kids do a decent job of sorting what refuse goes into specific bins, and RecycleSmart keeps an eye on the collection contents for accuracy. Sullivan was the

Master of Ceremonies when it came time to have the students simultaneously take a bite out of a carrot. Before the big event, he gave the kids some facts about the three crunchy vegetables on the menu for the day. The afternoon's cauliflower came from Salinas, California and is a relative to broccoli and cabbage. The corn was grown in Brentwood, California and is classified as a fruit. The mention of corn tortillas was a big hit with the crowd. The rainbow carrots (either orange, yellow, or purple) came from Bakerville and help to promote healthy eyesight, heart, and lungs.

Containers of the multi-colored carrots were placed on all tables, and the students were encouraged to grab one in preparation for the countdown from ten to one, at which point Sullivan described it as the "Crunch of the Century." The previously untouched carrots from the salad bar suddenly became part of a lunchtime game as the kids happily crunched away and finished their entire carrot. Note to parents: if playing a game is all that it takes to get your kids to eat certain vegetables – let the games begin.

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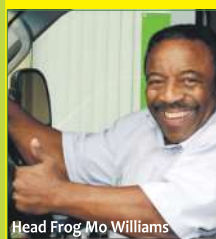
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