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April 17, 2013  
Agenda Item 17c

## Apron Strings

San Ramon Observer: Roz Rogoff, posted by Roz Rogoff, the [San Ramon Observer](#), on [Mar 7, 2013](#) at 7:16 pm

Alameda County Supervisors Scott Haggerty and Nate Miley sort of agreed to separate the Zone 7 Water agency from Alameda County Flood Control District, but not without strings attached. Supervisor Miley said it must be done appropriately. "This is an opportunity to open up the discussion, not a decision for separation." Haggerty seemed ready to move forward. "This is a huge step," Haggerty said. Miley said it is important to move forward in Contra Costa County.

The Supervisors want to retain some control over the agency or the split or the functions before granting independence from Alameda County.

The separation was started last year by State Senator Mark DeSaulnier in SB1337. The bill would have made Zone 7 an independent District instead of a branch of the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District. Supervisors Haggerty and Miley objected to DeSaulnier's Bill in a letter to Zone 7 last June.

"We also strongly feel that a matter such as the proposed separation should include local citizen input which the LAFCo process provides. To bypass the LAFCo process in favor of special legislation takes the matter out of the hands of the local community and makes the decision a state-wide matter." As a result of their opposition to SB1337, Senator DeSaulnier put SB1337 on hold.

LAFCO's (Local Agency Formation Commissions) are organized by County, so there is a Contra Costa County LAFCO and an Alameda County LAFCO.

Surprise! Haggerty and Miley are both on the Alameda County LAFCO, along with Supervisor Wilma Chan as an alternate; so essentially Haggerty and Miley want to continue their input into the separation process via their roles on the Alameda County LAFCO.

The Contra Costa County LAFCO is composed of Supervisor Federal Glover, who represents Northern Contra Costa County, and Mary Piepho, our previous County Supervisor. Candace Andersen, our current County Supervisor, is the Alternate. This should make for some interesting cross-County positions on the separation.

The tug of war is over flood control. Zone 7 wants to keep doing it, but Supervisors Haggerty and Miley want Alameda County to keep it. I've been told there's money in flood control. According to the Zone 7 website, [<http://www.zone7water.com/who-pays-for-flood-protection-invisible-menu-223?task=view> flood control is paid for] out of property taxes with development fees going to a flood control expansion fund. In addition, Zone 7 reclaims some of the water from flood control to recharge ground water.

In a reply to my blog on [<http://www.sanramonexpress.com/square/index.php?i=3&d=&t=1266> Zone 7 Needs You], Bill Williams (a resident of Dublin) wrote, "Splitting these duties between two entities would only muddle (sic) things and raise the cost, while lowering the quality of services." I don't know who Bill Williams is, but this supported what was presented at the meeting last August. This meeting was to assure employees that the separation would not affect their employment. A small group of eight or ten employees opposed the separation, but they were in the minority.

At the end of the Supervisor's Committee meeting on Tuesday night, Supervisor Haggerty made a cryptic reference to a group of people he was expecting who did not show up. He said the meeting was promoted well and "I waited to hear from the people affected and they are not here. They did not show up."

It appeared he was expecting some opposition, which didn't materialize. Haggerty claimed his office received a call saying that the Zone 7 employees had been discouraged from coming to this public meeting. He asked how many people in the audience work at Zone 7 and quite a few stood up. Two employees said they supported the separation. One said he was not discouraged from attending the meeting.

If this meeting was promoted well to a specific group, it wasn't to the general public. I was tipped off to it by a friend at DSRSD and she hardly knew any of the details. I had to dig for the location and time the meeting started. I was originally told it would be at Zone 7 at 7 pm, but it was at 6 pm at the Alameda County Public Works building in Dublin, which I never even knew existed.

I was surprised by the size of the audience. I counted 20 before the start of the meeting and more arrived later. Dolores Ciardelli wrote a [[http://www.sanramonexpress.com/news/show\\_story.php?id=7102](http://www.sanramonexpress.com/news/show_story.php?id=7102) detailed story] on the home page about who was there and what was said.

The issue they all agreed on was making sure residents of Dougherty Valley are able to vote in Zone 7 elections. "We need to make sure San Ramon gets a seat on the board." That sounds like the Supervisors want Directors elected by District rather than at large. This would assure that San Ramon gets at least one seat on the Board. It took ten years for San Ramon to win a seat back on DSRSD, so I would certainly support dividing up the Zone 7 board by district for true "Local Control."

## Comments

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<http://sanramonexpress.com/square/index.php?i=3&t=1546>

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## Zone 7 water agency inches toward independence

### *Supervisors express concerns over rates, flood control*

Would an independent Zone 7 water agency result in higher or lower rates for residents?

Zone 7 representatives say that separating from Alameda County would remove a layer of administration resulting in lower rates. But Supervisor Scott Haggerty said Tuesday night that this would not necessarily be the case.

In the past, Alameda County has turned down an enhanced retirement benefit for Zone 7, Haggerty told the several dozen people who attended the meeting.

"If Zone 7 separates and gives the enhanced retirement benefit, I'm not sure the rates wouldn't be raised," he added.

Zone 7 provides water to more than 200,000 people in the Dougherty Valley, Pleasanton, Livermore and Dublin, as well as managing local run-off and groundwater. It imports 80 percent of the water from the South Bay Aqueduct, which is run by the state.

The seven-member Zone 7 board of directors is elected by Alameda County residents; separating from the county would enable Dougherty Valley residents to run for the board and vote for its members, Zone 7 General Manager Jill Duerig said in her presentation.

"Through its retailer, Dublin San Ramon Services District (DSRSD), Zone 7 serves over 15,000 residents in Dougherty Valley, in south San Ramon within Contra Costa County," Duerig said. "With separation, they would no longer be disenfranchised."

DSRSD Board Member Georgeen Vonheeder Leopold read a letter supporting Zone 7 separating from the county. It noted that in addition to creating equality for Dougherty Valley, it would eliminate the duplication of services.

Jill Ray of Contra Costa Supervisor Candace Andersen's office also spoke to express Andersen's concern that Dougherty Valley residents currently do not have a say with Zone 7.

Supervisors Miley and Haggerty also had opinions about how the separation should be done.

"The county doesn't want it to happen piecemeal," Miley said. "We want it to be comprehensive, thorough and complete. Fiscal implications must be resolved."

Zone 7, which already sets its own salaries, has reported that raising employee contributions for higher benefits in order to keep employer contributions stable was discussed at a meeting in 2007 but no more discussions have taken place.

"I've never seen if you create another bureaucracy that rates wouldn't go up," Haggerty said.

At Tuesday's meeting, which was held at the County Public Works Agency in Dublin to get input from the public, Haggerty and Supervisor Nate Miley expressed concerns about coordinating flood control between Zone 7 and the rest of Alameda County.

Zone 7 participates in the Bay Area Flood Protection Agencies Association, and it represents the Flood Protection/Stormwater Management Functional Area for the entire Bay Area.

"The mission is to provide an effective flood control system for the Livermore-Amador Valley in a fiscally responsible,

innovative, proactive and environmentally sensitive manner," Zone 7 General Manager Jill Duerig said in her presentation. "We try to leverage the money we have by working with others."

"LAFCO (Local Agency Formation Commission) is the appropriate venue for this to be vetted," he added. "I want this to go to LAFCO. Any attempt to go by LAFCO, I would oppose."

He noted that the county has had other entities separate from it, such as Alameda County Medical Center.

"I know it isn't going to happen quickly," he said. "It's not a sprint, it's a marathon. I want to make sure the county is maintaining its integrity as well."

"I'm supportive of this separation but want to see it done right," Haggerty said. "I want to see a comprehensive plan."

He noted that giving Dougherty Valley a say in the running of Zone 7 does not guarantee that one of its residents will be elected to a seat on the board.

Miley suggested a meeting between Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

Duerig said after the meeting that because Zone 7 has existed since 1957 and has always worked incrementally toward separation, that she had not thought it needed to start with LAFCO but if the supervisors are more comfortable with that route, she was amenable.

Find this article at:

[http://www.sanramonexpress.com/news/show\\_story.php?story\\_id=7102detailedstory](http://www.sanramonexpress.com/news/show_story.php?story_id=7102detailedstory)]

## Barone named city manager of Concord

By David DeBolt Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Thursday, March 14, 2013  
ContraCostaTimes.com

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CONCORD -- After a nationwide search, a familiar face has been named the city's next top executive.

The city council on Tuesday announced the selection of Valerie Barone as city manager, more than a year after she was appointed to the interim position following the departure of Dan Keen. The council's decision was unanimous; the hiring is not final until a contract is made available to the public and ratified by council.

"She has consistently displayed high intelligence, creativity, a broad skill set and a 'can do' approach," Mayor Dan Helix said, reading a statement. "No matter what the issue she always ensures that the view and needs of all stakeholders are accounted for."

Barone served as the assistant city manager to Keen until he left in February 2012 to take over as city manager in Vallejo. Before that, Barone worked as the community development director in the city of Walnut Creek, and had previously held the same job in Milpitas.

David DeBolt covers Concord and Clayton. Contact him at 925-943-8048. Follow him at [Twitter.com/daviddebolt](https://twitter.com/daviddebolt).

## **Contra Costa fire station plan is irresponsible and sheer folly:**

### **Contra Costa Times**

*Contra Costa Times editorial © 2103, Bay Area News Group Contra Costa Times*

*Posted:*

Thursday, March 14, 2013

ContraCostaTimes.com

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The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District has had to close four of its 28 fire stations, lacks funds for basic capital needs and has launched a study to determine how it can restructure to save money.

Yet its leaders, the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors, voted Tuesday to proceed with talks to jointly build and operate a new fire station with the neighboring Moraga Orinda Fire District.

If those two messages seem inconsistent, that's because they are. This is sheer folly.

Supervisor Karen Mitchoff of Pleasant Hill was the lone voice of sanity. No matter how good the deal for a new fire station might be, she noted, the district can't afford it. "I think the rest of the community will be jeopardized if we move forward with this plan," she said.

She's right: Continuing with this charade falsely raises expectations.

Chief Daryl Louder insists the district -- serving much of Central County as well as Antioch, Pittsburg and San Pablo -- will save money. But that calculation assumes that the district first reopens its closed station in Lafayette. It's not clear that will ever happen. So, actually, the new station would require the district to spend more, not less, money.

Supervisors must get a grip. They need to first figure out how they are going to provide and pay for existing services. Increasing the burden is irresponsible.

## County supervisors agree to move ahead with joint Lafayette fire station

By Jennifer Modenessi Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Thursday, March 14, 2013  
ContraCostaTimes.com

MARTINEZ -- County supervisors are allowing the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District to continue exploring a joint fire station in Lafayette with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, despite growing concerns from some residents about equity, response times and the suitability of the proposed site.

The Board of Supervisors voted 4-1 on Tuesday to allow ConFire Chief Daryl Louder to continue "serious" negotiations with Moraga-Orinda Chief Randy Bradley to jointly build, operate and staff a new fire station on the Orinda-Lafayette border. Supervisor Karen Mitchoff opposed the talks, and John Gioia -- who had previously expressed reservations about the discussion -- asked for more financial analysis.

The approval came a day after a majority of Moraga-Orinda directors voted to proceed with informal negotiations despite an outcry from residents living near the project site.

Neighbors cautioned officials that the area of Lorinda Lane and El Nido Ranch Road is prone to flooding and slides.

"If you go into this process now having not thought about those things, it could end up costing you much more," warned Sharon Dixon McLaughlin. Officials said there will be a full environmental review.

The fire districts estimate it will cost between \$5 million and \$6 million to buy the land, complete site and utility work and construct the new fire station. They also estimate it will cost about \$2 million annually to staff the station and about \$186,000 to operate it each year.

Other residents voiced concerns about costs and a lack of public engagement.

"You want to move to cover some losses that some other entity has (that's) caused them to close a fire station," said Orinda resident Jerry Dimsdale. "You say we're going to save \$1 million a year (but) you haven't asked me if I'm willing to foot any of that bill."

A handful of the more than 40 attendees voiced support for continued talks.

The negotiations have been under way since January, when ConFire approached the district about operating a joint facility following the closure of a station in west Lafayette due to budget cuts.

Moraga-Orinda would close its station on Via Las Cruces as part of the consolidation -- a move some Orinda residents oppose.

The district's board president, Frank Sperling, on Monday once again voted against the joint proposal, arguing that Moraga-Orinda was bailing out ConFire. Director Steve Anderson, who supported the measure, argued the \$1 million annual savings was an opportunity to ensure Moraga-Orinda's long-term sustainability.

The approvals will allow the district to continue negotiating the purchase of a Lafayette property where the new station would be built. MOFD bid on the property earlier this month and has until March 28 to submit a \$15,000 nonrefundable deposit, which it says it will split with the county. The chiefs are planning to bring a final contract back to their boards for approval in May.

The Lafayette Planning Commission will hold a special study session Monday to discuss the station. The Board of Supervisors will discuss the station merger again March 19 and the Moraga-Orinda district will hold a public workshop on the consolidation March 20 in Orinda.



## Ambrose park board votes to delay public meetings on park upgrade

By Eve Mitchell Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News

Posted:

Monday, March 18, 2013  
ContraCostaTimes.com

**BAY POINT** -- A planned series of community meetings on how best to spend funds to improve Ambrose Park has been put on hold while the district considers a possible sale of a different parcel of park property that could provide additional money for the improvements.

Ambrose Recreation & Park District board members voted 4-1 last week to hold off on setting meeting dates until next month to gather more information that could result in the sale of the land, located at Willow Pass Road and Clearland Drive. The vacant lot is just down the street from district headquarters in Bay Point.

Board member Lee Mason cast the no vote. "The money really is not the issue," he said. "The issue is we need to get new input into this project."

Ambrose Park is in Pittsburg, but the park is owned and maintained by the park district.

At its January meeting, the board indicated it wanted to hold public hearings on developing a new plan for park improvements after bids came in too high last year to demolish a lap pool.

The pool had closed in 2008 for code violations, and the district planned to replace it with a children's pool. About \$1.7 million in voter-approved bond funds from the East Bay Regional Park District's Measure WW are available for construction costs, but the lowest bid was about \$700,000 higher.

District officials then learned of an offer made for the Willow Pass Road property and held a closed session Feb. 21 to discuss it.

At Thursday's meeting, Bay Point resident Michael Kerr contended there is no reason to sell the Willow Pass Road property when real estate prices have fallen from where they were years ago.

"It would be a dereliction to sell the district property at this time when there is no need for additional funds," he said.

On Friday, board chairman Steve Hoagland said the district owns the property free and clear and has been trying to sell it for several years. If the sale does happen, he said it could bring the district "a substantial amount of money ... hundreds of thousands" of dollars in additional funding that could be used in any way the board decides.

At their April 11 meeting, board members are expected make a decision on whether to sell the property and also set community hearing dates for the Ambrose Park improvements.

Mason said if the property sale happens and extra funding becomes available, the discussion on how to use any extra funds should not be limited to Ambrose Park. Other parks also need attention, he said.

The district held two public workshops in 2009 that resulted in the adoption of a master plan for the children's pool project and other Ambrose Park improvements. The children's pool was included in the master plan as a cost-effective solution to a new lap pool. But some in the community wanted the old pool to be brought up to code and reopened.

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# Barnidge: Contra Costa library healthier than ever as it prepares to turn 100

[By Tom Barnidge Contra Costa Times Columnist](#)

Posted: 03/25/2013 11:47:42 AM PDT

Updated: 03/26/2013 07:20:57 AM PDT

When Director Barbara Flynn is invited to speak about Contra Costa County Library's approaching 100th anniversary, she has a novel way of bringing context to the magnitude of the moment.

"I do a whole talk called, 'I was there,'" she said, "as if the library was speaking about what it's seen. I begin with 1913 and go through my list of milestones, beginning with World War I, then the stock market crash, the Great Depression, World War II, our only four-term president ..."

By the time she ushers Barack Obama into office, listeners understand the longevity of the institution and the generations who have benefited from it.

Woodrow Wilson was president in 1913. A first-class stamp cost 2 cents.



After school, Deer Valley High School freshmen Nicholas Nguyen, left, and Jerilene Tibayan work on geometry homework at the school library on Tuesday, March 23, 2010, in Antioch, Calif. The city, Antioch school district, Deer Valley High School, Contra Costa County Library, Police Activities League, City of Antioch Recreation Department and local service clubs have partnered on a project to expand library hours and programs for students at Deer Valley High School. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Staff)

Commercial air travel did not yet exist. The library was established on July 21 of that year, with two modest facilities in Walnut Creek and Concord. Today it blankets the county with 26 branches and serves more than 560,000 cardholders who borrowed 7.5 million items last year.

Flynn, who has worked in libraries for more than 30 years, marvels at the evolution she's witnessed since she first checked out books as a young girl.

"I remember a library card that had little squares on it," she said. "When you borrowed a book, they'd put a stamp in the square. When you returned it, they stamped the square next to it."

Every aspect of the operation is automated now. Lenders check out books with bar code scans and reserve them through online requests. Reference materials are available 24 hours a day with the click of a mouse.

"Remember those big Chilton auto repair manuals?" Flynn said. "In the early days, you couldn't even borrow those -- you had to photo copy the pages. Now they can be downloaded and you can take them with you to work on your car."

Library offerings long ago expanded beyond printed materials. Among the items available now are DVDs, CDs, e-books, audio books, film programs, Wi-Fi access, speaker series, even foreign language lessons.

"People use libraries for many different things," she said. "One example is job seekers who are out of work and can no longer afford Internet at home. They see an ad, and it says apply online only. They come to the library."

"I read an article recently that said it best: A library is a place where we can get things for free we otherwise would have to pay for."

A fascinating website (<http://guides.ccclib.org/100thbirthday>) presents a thumbnail glimpse of the Contra Costa library's evolution, with archived photos and a timeline of important events. One of those was last year when it was awarded the Institute of Museum and Library Service's national medal for community service.

The library will celebrate what it's achieved during its first 100 years on July 21 at Pleasant Hill Park, with music, games and programs for all ages. As always, everyone is invited.

For all that's changed, Flynn notes, one thing about libraries has not. She relates the observation by way of a history lesson, recalling the many early libraries funded by industrialist Andrew Carnegie.

"A Carnegie library was usually a very striking building," she said. "It always had stairs leading up to it, and the reason was very pointed. When people went into a library and learned, they were raising themselves up."

One hundred years later in Contra Costa County, that's an everyday event.

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## City-sponsored water loan program aimed at keeping Antioch youth programs afloat

By Paul Bugarino Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times  
Posted:

Tuesday, April 2, 2013  
ContraCostaTimes.com

ANTIOCH -- Let the water flow.

That's the message Antioch leaders expressed several times last week shortly after agreeing to provide financial help for three nonprofits to tap their own wells.

Antioch will provide the Antioch Youth Sports Complex, Antioch Babe Ruth League and Antioch Historical Society with 20-year, no-interest loans to develop or rebuild wells. The loans, which would cover about \$77,000 worth of work, will also be forgiven at a rate of 5 percent each year. The nonprofits also plan to pursue grant money or other means to repay the loan.

"The idea is we want these organizations here for a long time. We want them here for many years, teaching our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren," Mayor Wade Harper said.

The decision comes months after the city decided to cut off the free water service it had been providing, a move some thought would mean "game over" for several youth sports leagues.

It costs Antioch about \$140,000 a year to provide nonpotable water to the groups, Public Works Director Ron Bernal said.

Ed Daviess, president of the Babe Ruth league, said he was pleased with the council's decision, including that the no-interest-rate loan makes it easier since his league's revenue does not "stream in throughout the year."

"It makes it so we can survive, which is what we were hoping for and also allows us to be environmentally conscious," Daviess said. "This is the best thing for all of us."

Antioch has been paying the nonprofits' water for almost two decades; first using its water fund -- money ratepayers pay for water treatment and distribution -- and later its redevelopment agency and other accounts, before eventually using general fund money, City Manager Jim Jakel said last fall.

The water expenses "came under the microscope" as the city's budget situation worsened four years ago, Jakel said.

The city and nonprofits have been discussing possible solutions since last fall.

The council said that a suggested option of using recycled water would prove far too expensive.

"Wells are the best low-cost alternative," councilman Gary Agopian said. "It gets us all in the direction we want to go."

The Youth Sports Complex fields are used by about 3,000 children in Antioch Little League, Delta Youth Soccer League and Delta Baseball & Softball League. Babe Ruth has about 300 players ages 13 to 18.

The sports complex uses about \$75,000 annually in water, Babe Ruth uses about \$60,000 and the historical society \$5,000. Those costs could be slashed significantly once the wells are installed.

Both nonprofit sites have existing wells in the properties, but the sports complex does not have a pump installed. The historical society does not have an existing well.

In addition to well maintenance costs, the organizations also have to pay for city water to run the snack bar and restrooms.

[http://www.contracostatimes.com/east-county-times/ci\\_22917823/city-sponsored-water-loan-program-aimed-at-keeping](http://www.contracostatimes.com/east-county-times/ci_22917823/city-sponsored-water-loan-program-aimed-at-keeping)  
Contact Paul Bugarino at 925-779-7164. Follow him at [Twitter.com/paulbugarino](https://twitter.com/paulbugarino).

## Contra Costa Fire Chief Daryl Louder calls it quits

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen *Contra Costa Times* *Contra Costa Times*  
Posted:

Tuesday, April 2, 2013  
ContraCostaTimes.com

MARTINEZ -- Contra Costa Fire District Chief Daryl Louder is calling it quits after two-and-a-half years in the Golden State.

The former Fairfax County, Va., fire chief told county supervisors in an email Monday that family obligations are pulling him back home, and he will retire on Oct. 31 from the \$176,975-a-year job.

"It has been an ongoing challenge for my wife and I to reside in California when all of our family members live on the East Coast," wrote Louder, 58, who recently put his Concord house on the real estate market. "Now, we have family members who are experiencing health problems that require our closer attention and time."

Louder says he will devote the next seven months to helping the county's largest fire department deal with its serious financial problems and transition to a new fire chief.

"I appreciate Chief Louder giving us seven months' notice of his upcoming retirement," said Supervisor Karen Mitchoff of Concord. "Family matters are always the first priority. I wish him well in his retirement."

The chief is retiring from full-time employment as a fire professional, but he will not collect a Contra Costa County pension, Louder confirmed. He would have had to work at least five years to become eligible for the benefit. Instead, he will receive retirement income from Virginia, he said.

The chief has had a rough time in Contra Costa, arriving in mid-2010 as the brunt of the housing market collapse hit his department's budget. The fire district depends almost solely on property taxes, which saw double-digit dips as home values plunged. The district's financial woes were exacerbated by rapidly rising firefighters' pension contribution rates.

Voters then nixed a temporary parcel tax last year that would have kept the agency somewhat intact, and the chief has been unhappily focused on shaving service and closing stations. Several members of the Board of Supervisors also have openly criticized the chief's job performance.

But Louder said that is not why he's leaving.

"Yes, it is a very challenging environment, but that's what they pay me to do, to make some difficult decisions," Louder said. "(The challenges had) nothing to do with my decision. It was strictly a personal decision."

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## Bethel Island to be getting more 'dry hydrants'

By Rowena Coetsee Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times  
Posted:

Wednesday, April 3, 2013  
ContraCostaTimes.com

BETHEL ISLAND -- Every second counts when a home is burning, and some residents here are giving themselves that gift of time.

Over the past three years, clusters of neighbors have installed 18 pipes reaching from the San Joaquin River to the levee encircling the tiny community so that firefighters can draft any extra water they need faster.

Known as "dry hydrants," the stationary 6-inch PVC pipes range in length from about 40 feet to 80 feet and can channel water at the same rate as a fire engine's pump -- up to 1,500 gallons of water per minute, said longtime resident Mark Whitlock.

He's been leading the charge to set up these conduits on the island since a three-alarm fire in September 2008 destroyed two homes on the road where he used to live.

Bethel Island's approximately 2,100 residents are particularly worried about the danger of fire, in part because of the lack of conventional water hydrants.

Most residential areas have never had any, and the five ones along the main road through town were taken out of action in summer 2010 when the pump that serviced them was removed during the reconstruction of Bethel Island Bridge.

Adding to their concerns is that firefighters' response times have increased significantly since the island's fire station closed July 1, a casualty of budget cuts.

Although each fire engine arrives with a water truck to supplement its supply of water, when those reserves run low, crews have two choices: Replenish their tanks from a hydrant about 1½ miles off the island near the intersection of East Cypress and Bethel Island roads -- a potentially disastrous diversion when time is of the essence -- or pump water from the Delta.

If an engine company opts for the river, dry hydrants are a more efficient way to get the water where it needs to go, said Chief Hugh Henderson of the East Contra Costa Fire District.

For starters, firefighters don't lose time clambering down the jumble of rock buttressing the outer side of the levee to put a hose in the water -- the pipe is already there, he said.

"It speeds up the process of getting water out of the Delta," Henderson said.

The process also is faster because crews need to connect only one section of their hose to the end of the pipe, he said. Hoses are stored on an engine in 10-foot lengths, so making one long enough to reach the water requires firefighters to join several segments, Henderson said.

These two aspects of dry hydrants enable crews to start spraying a fire in about half the time, he said.

In addition, they extend farther into the river than firefighters' hoses might be able to at low tide, Henderson said.

And once an engine can hook its pump up to a hydrant, it not only can douse burning structures on roads parallel to the levee, but it can also convey that water to other engines, thereby extending fire crews' reach, Henderson said.

Despite the advantages, the only time his men have used these hydrants since the first one was installed in February 2010 has been in training exercises because there haven't been any nearby when they've responded to blazes large enough to warrant their use, Henderson said.

Whitlock's goal is to change that by getting a dry hydrant installed approximately every 700 feet along the inhabited sections of Bethel Island's 1 1/2-mile perimeter -- roughly 45 in all, he estimates.

To that end, he pitches the idea to homeowners in areas where it would be logical to install a dry hydrant, makes presentations at the levee maintenance district's board meetings and attends sessions of virtually every other local decision-making body with business on the island.

"Eighteen (hydrants) doesn't sound like a lot, but I have hours invested for every one of those out there," Whitlock said. "Unless I die, I will finish this. I will not quit."

Property owners served by three of the 11 private water companies on the island have voted to pay for most of the hydrants, which start at \$1,500 for the 40-foot length of pipe that's typically needed. Two groups of homeowners and the San Joaquin Yacht Club have funded the remaining three.

Five more dry hydrants will be going in over the next six weeks, Whitmore said.

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