

Barnidge: Contra Costa Mosquito & Vector Control wages war on disease-carrying critters

By Tom Barnidge Contra Costa Times Columnist Contra Costa Times
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Did you know there are 23 types of mosquitoes in the East Bay, and a female can lay 400 eggs in two tablespoons of standing water? Did you know rats and mice are known carriers of bacterial disease? That a skunk bite can lead to rabies?

These are among the concerns of the Contra Costa Mosquito & Vector Control District, which services the county's 735 square miles but remains one of its least understood public health agencies.

The district was formed more than 86 years ago out of necessity, spokeswoman Deborah Bass said: "In 1927, the marsh mosquitoes were so bad that schools closed. There were reports of children's arms being blackened with mosquitoes."

The miserable little bloodsuckers remain the district's biggest concern, occupying 12 of its 17 technicians and most of its attention, but its duties go far beyond pesticides and smogging.

The upper floor of the Concord-based facility is dedicated to lab work, where live specimens are nurtured, tested and examined. The insectary houses pans of mosquito larvae at various stages of growth, and a screened box is filled with nasty-looking adults.

"They're our control group," said scientific program manager Steve Schutz. "One of our concerns is mosquitoes developing a tolerance for some pesticides. By comparing how long it takes to kill these and the wild ones, we can tell if the wild ones are developing a resistance."

Schutz is so committed to the program that he allows females to bite his arm once a week for the protein-rich blood they need to reproduce. Only females bite, and not out of hunger. Mosquitoes subsist on plant juices.

It's because some species can transfer diseases -- West Nile virus and canine heartworm among them -- that officials carefully identify each by its appearance and characteristics. Some bite at night, some at day; some travel great distances, some hover near home. Even their breeding water preferences differ.

The district's abatement program emphasizes educating residents -- "Clogged rain gutters can produce thousands of mosquitoes," Bass said -- and natural controls, primarily mosquitofish. The guppy-size fish happily dine on mosquito larvae -- as many as 500 a day. The district raises about 1 million of the fish per year, and offers them free to residents for use in mosquito breeding pools on their property.

The district, which is funded through property taxes and benefit assessments, also makes thousands of free service calls for residents wondering how to rid themselves of rats, mice, skunks or ground-nesting yellow jackets.

The newest concern is the discovery in Southern California of mosquitoes capable of spreading yellow fever and dengue fever. Schutz theorizes they hitchhiked their way to California in airplane

cargo holds. They possess the ability to transfer the diseases from human to human after biting anyone who is infected. General Manager Craig Downs, with the district since 1981, said that's the biggest change in the agency's evolution -- its emphasis on disease control.

"When the West Nile virus arrived, it was the new invasive thing," he said. "Now we're seeing it again. Instead of (mosquito control) just being a standard-of-living thing, it's a true public health need."

Rest assured that the district is on the case, even if no one notices.

For more information, visit contracostamosquito.com. Contact Tom Barnidge at tbarnidge@bayareanewsgroup.com.

Contra Costa: Residents' concern grows over Delta tunnels plan

By Paul Burgarino pburgarino@bayareanewsgroup.com Contra Costa Times

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KNIGHTSEN -- As the state prepares to unveil key environmental documents for Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to build two large tunnels to move Sacramento River water south, dozens of concerned East Contra Costans were brought up to speed last week on how it could impact their Delta backyard.

The governor's \$24.7 billion plan is widely opposed around the Delta communities, as opponents say the tunnels would reduce fresh water flows, endanger local fish and other habitat and put a sizable financial dent in local agriculture.

Most, if not all, of the 60 residents at Thursday's forum hosted by the Contra Costa Farm Bureau and Contra Costa Taxpayers Association, echoed those sentiments.

According to the state, the Bay Delta Conservation Plan meets a pair of long-term goals: enhancing the Delta's long-term ecological health, and improving water supply reliability for 25 million Californians and San Joaquin Valley farms.

Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, executive director of Stockton-based Restore the Delta, disputes the water claim, saying that while quality improves for those south of the pumps, analysis shows a 51 percent decrease for Contra Costans.

County Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho of Discovery Bay said the tunnels plan lacks significant scientific studies, and that smaller-scale development alternatives are not being considered.

"(The state) is reverse-engineering it," Piepho said. "They're talking about the project first and what the exporters need from a quantity perspective, and maybe they're going to shoehorn the science and ecology in to make it fit."

Also, Delta counties do not have a role in the plan's decision-making process, Piepho said.

"They are taking too much (water), it's in the wrong location and there's no local control over it," she said. Dr. Jeffery Michael, an economist at University of the Pacific, said the plan is bad for the state as a whole and questions who would benefit.

"It's in the interest of a couple of narrow water agencies, and not necessarily the ratepayers of those agencies. It's in the interest of those that are running them," said Michael, who has been working for years on cost analyses of the state plan.

The state's plan assumes that Los Angeles is growing faster than it is, that the tunnels will open on time and there will be no extra costs, he said. Michael urged those in the farm bureau to show the math, which he says doesn't pencil out, to other group members around the state.

Barrigan-Parrilla said there is anti-tunnel momentum growing across California and urged those in attendance to read the documents, comment and stay engaged. Voters are leery of paying for a bond for the tunnels, while more people in Southern California are becoming aware of the repercussions, she said.

"When people hear that 'I'm going to get this by destroying your community,' they shake their heads and walk away. They don't want to do that," Barrigan-Parrilla said.

Knightsen resident Cecilia Tamayo-Canzani said she's concerned about the potential for her pumped water to become saltier and that the pounding from tunnel work miles away could "take a toll on her home's foundation."

"It's making me really worried," she said.

Others raised concerns that levees could be in jeopardy since they live in a flood zone and wondered how they could afford skyrocketing water rates to help cover project costs.

Public comments will be accepted for 120 days after the Dec. 13 release of the environmental documents. The Water Resources Department is planning formal meetings throughout the state to get feedback. Officials emphasize that no decision has been made by state and federal agencies about moving forward with the project.

Contact Paul Bugarino at 925-779-7164. Follow him at [Twitter.com/paulbugarino](https://twitter.com/paulbugarino).

MORE Information

To find out more about the pros and cons of the proposed Bay Delta Conservation Plan, here are some websites worth checking out.

<http://www.baydeltaconservationplan.com>

<http://www.restorethedelta.org>

<http://deltacoalition.org>

<http://www.socalwater.org>

Contra Costa Times editorial: Moraga Orinda Fire District on unsustainable fiscal path

Contra Costa Times editorial © 2013 Bay Area News Group Contra Costa Times

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Residents of Moraga and Orinda: Wake up! If your fire district directors don't take drastic action soon, the two-city agency will run short of money to operate.

The district's auditor has warned that it's on an "unsustainable" fiscal path. As new Director Alex Evans says: "We have to put everything on the table. Otherwise we're going to go out of business." Recently, appointed Chief Stephen Healy adds, "We're just trying to keep the lights on."

Worse, that doesn't begin to address the district's soaring long-term debt for employee retirement benefits, which has increased 38 percent in just two years to a staggering \$94 million.

We hate to tell you we told you so. But for years we've been warning that this day would come, that the district was spending far beyond its means while ignoring its ballooning financial liabilities.

Some directors say they are providing the service constituents want. Residents might want it, but the district cannot afford it. And if those residents understood the huge debt being dumped onto future generations of taxpayers, they would rebel.

Unfortunately, most residents seem ignorant of, or indifferent to, the crisis. And the two veteran board members -- Fred Weil and John Wyro -- have buried their heads in the sand for years.

The district has had plenty of money: Its general fund expenditures are about the same as the city governments of Moraga and Orinda combined. Yet it has consistently budgeted expenses that exceed revenues.

That's right: Directors planned to run the district in the red. To cover the difference, they dipped into reserves. Now that kitty has dried up.

This day of reckoning was inevitable but came slightly early because the district had been claiming it had access to funds actually needed to pay off bondholders. The district's new finance chief recently discovered the error.

Then there's the debt. The district's pension and retiree health programs are deeply underfunded. The \$94 million represents the difference between how much has already been set aside for benefits and how much it should have now.

It's an obligation the district must pay. Property owners will be on the hook for decades to cover the cost of retirement benefits workers have already earned. To put it in perspective, the debt works out to about \$7,800 for every household in the district. It's more than five times the district's annual revenues.

Directors have started to wake up and make changes. But, they must go much further to restore financial stability. Meanwhile, voters should wake up, too. After all, there is a board election next year.

Moraga-Orinda fire district retirement debt climbs

By Jennifer Modenessi Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News

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MORAGA -- The amount residents will have to pay for benefits earned by current and past Moraga-Orinda Fire District employees continues to climb in the midst of a financial crisis for the cash-strapped district.

According to a recent review of the pension plan managed by the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association, Moraga and Orinda taxpayers will now have to cover a \$45 million gap between the value of pension benefits earned by MOFD employees and retirees, and the money available to fund them.

That is an 87 percent increase from last year's funding shortfall. It doesn't include the retiree health care benefits promised by the district to employees and their spouses, which has its own \$24.1 million shortfall. It also doesn't include \$24 million the district owes for bonds it issued to pay off past pension debt.

In addition to employer retirement contribution rates being higher than predicted earlier this year, the overall funding shortfall is so much greater that MOFD administrators brought in an independent consultant to review the county's revised annual projection. Based on that projection, the district will have to make a \$5.2 million employer payment to the county retirement system in fiscal year 2014-15 -- an amount equal to 80 percent of the district's projected \$7 million payroll.

"The impact of the increased rates to our budget is significant," said MOFD Administrative Services Director Gloriann Sasser. "It seems prudent and responsible to perform our own review."

But the independent analysis doesn't reveal any good news. According to the review, the county's numbers hold up.

"We believe the results of the valuation -- as painful as they are -- are accurate," actuary John Bartel told the board on Nov. 20. The increases stem from the retirement association's lowering of expectations on future investment returns, among other factors.

A drop in the number of active firefighters and a decrease in average pay is also having an impact. The district's lowered payroll means the proportion of salary costs toward employee retirement has to go up, Bartel explained. Firefighters hired before new pension laws went into effect this year can retire at age 50 with pensions equal to 3 percent of their final average salary multiplied by years of service. The benefit is 2.7 percent of final average salary at age 57 for new employees. The number of retirees is also increasing, along with their benefits. The district's 91 firefighter/safety retirees now receive an average of about \$7,800 in pension benefits each month.

Fire Chief Stephen Healy said the district is looking at all it can do to address the problem.

"Everything's on the table right now. That includes everything in our budget on the expenditure side," Healy said.

ANTIOCH DEVELOPMENT

By Paul Burgarino

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ANTIOCH — This city is looking to create a more consistent policy for how it charges developers to serve new growth.

A major piece of Antioch's revised growth management program is establishing a specific set of one-time charges on builders to cover new facilities and services needed to handle growth, such as roads, parks and police services.

The recently released draft Development Impact Fee looks at Antioch's projected future growth, needed facilities and cost estimates and a nexus showing how much new development should be expected to pay for those costs.

The study sets a maximum fee of \$7,198 per single-family unit, \$4,692 per multifamily unit, and 77 cents per nonresidential square foot. Sewer and water, school district and regional road fees would stay the same.

Under Antioch's old growth system, a prospective developer had to score a certain number of points on a system to receive entitlements and offer certain local improvements, such as roads or parks, said Tina Wehrmeister, the city's community development director. Over time, that morphed into builders offering money, she said.

Walter Kieser, senior principal with Economic & Planning Systems Inc., the study's author, said that Antioch's system was uncommon.

"Antioch is trying to become less unusual and increase the certainty that a developer knows what they will have to pay without any undue discretion," he said.

The new fees will actually be less than before, as the old charges at the height of the economy in the early 2000s were about \$10,000 to \$14,000 per unit, Wehrmeister said. Antioch's residential development is expected to increase from 34,000 units to 44,800 as the city builds out, according to the study. That would increase its population from about 105,000 to 132,000. Future costs to accommodate that growth is \$124.8 million, with new growth being on the hook for about \$66.8 million of it.

After years of rampant growth in the 1990s, Antioch voters passed Measure U in 1998, an advisory measure aimed at phasing in new home construction to account for land-use and financial planning. It also said that growth should pay its own way through fees and other methods.

Bob Glover, executive director of the Building Industry Association of the Bay Area, said he skimmed over the study and sent the city a letter requesting a meeting with staff to further discuss the study and growth plans.

Antioch's planning commission agreed when it weighed in on study last week, requesting city staff meet with local stakeholders to discuss the study and what would be a reasonable trigger for growth metering. The City Council will consider adopting the new fees early next year.

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Antioch council agrees to annexation plan

By Paul Burgarino Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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ANTIOCH -- A plan to annex 678 acres to the city's northeast is now in the hands of the county's Local Agency Formation Commission.

Antioch leaders cleared the path for the annexation Tuesday night, approving a complex pair of financial agreements that spell out how future tax revenue would be split and funding for necessary area infrastructure.

The land is divided into three swaths: 481 acres of industrial waterfront that include two natural gas-fired power plants, 94 acres for marina and storage uses, and 103 acres of established rural properties off Viera Avenue.

The plans the City Council approved mirrored those approved by county supervisors earlier this month. The city and county reached that agreement after months of jockeying over the county's desire to keep entitlement authority over a piece of the industrial waterfront.

Property tax revenue in the area would be split 62 percent to the county and 38 percent to the city.

The city and county will contribute \$3 million over 10 years to add water, sewer and storm drains to Viera residential areas, with Antioch covering the rest with grants and loans. Antioch estimates it would cost about \$10.7 million, and nearly \$5 million more in other engineering and contingency costs, to add the infrastructure.

Antioch estimates the area could yield about \$970,000 to \$1 million in net tax revenue each year, starting in 2015, and provide other economic opportunities on the waterfront. Both parties will also set aside \$500,000 over the next five years to boost area economic development initiatives.

City Manager Jim Jakel said annexation could allow Antioch to capitalize on a "super underestimated location advantage" given its proximity to the power industry, water and a port.

"I put this annexation in the same category of the widening of Highway 4 or the opening of eBART. This is a really big deal for the city," Jakel said.

The council agreed, noting how long the process took.

"At the end of the day, when you end up with a document like this, that we can proudly say is going to deliver income, and jobs and leverage the waterfront, we can be proud of that," Councilman Gary Agopian said.

About a handful of concerned residents in the Viera area that are opposed to the annexation attended the meeting Tuesday but did not speak.

The formation commission, which has final say on all land boundaries, could consider the annexation in January.

For updates, check back to ContraCostaTimes.com.

Contact Paul Bugarino at 925-779-7164. Follow him at [Twitter.com/paulbugarino](https://twitter.com/paulbugarino).

Contra Costa Times editorial: Without help, death for Doctors Medical Center is only a matter of time

Contra Costa Times editorial © 2013 Bay Area News Group Contra Costa Times

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The hospital providing emergency room services to West Contra Costa's neediest patients is on life support, and without outside financial help, it won't survive past the spring.

It's time for Doctors Medical Center officials to begin preparing for what seems an inevitable shutdown. It's time for Kaiser to brace for an onslaught of emergency patients at its Richmond facility.

It's time for leaders at John Muir Health, officially a nonprofit organization, to look in the mirror and ask how they can live with themselves.

John Muir's Walnut Creek facility holds the lucrative contract as the county's designated trauma center. With that should come a social responsibility to help more-needy portions of the county.

Absent a bailout, Doctors will run out of cash sometime between March and May, current projections show. No one should be surprised by this.

In 2011, the West Contra Costa Healthcare District, which operates the hospital, sought and received voter approval for a \$47-per-house tax increase.

We backed Measure J, but warned that district and hospital officials needed to move quickly to restructure the operation and find a way to keep it going. Back then, it was clear that, even with the tax money, the district would go broke in 2014.

The projection then was this summer. Declining hospital inpatient volume has shortened its life expectancy a few months. But emergency room visits have not declined. And that should be great cause for concern.

The inpatient visits will probably be absorbed by nearby hospitals in a somewhat orderly manner. But the lack of an emergency room at Doctors will create a chaotic situation. Most residents in distress will go to the next-nearest facility.

Kaiser, which is not designed to take in patients who are not enrolled in one of its plans, will have no choice but to provide care to all emergency patients showing up at its door. That's the law.

To a lesser extent, Sutter's Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley is in the same boat. So, while John Muir has a moral obligation to assist, it's in Kaiser's and Sutter's financial interests to help out, too.

Whatever aid they do provide would probably be only stopgap. In which case Doctors Medical Center cannot continue on its own. That's clear. It must find a new permanent source of funding or a larger hospital to absorb it. Given Doctors' high level of uninsured and poorly insured patients, that will not be easy.

But without emergency resuscitation, death is certain. It's only a matter of time.

Martinez may take another shot at annexing North Pacheco

By Lisa P. White *Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times*

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MARTINEZ -- About a year after losing its bid to annex North Pacheco, the city may try again to expand its boundaries. Last year, North Pacheco residents narrowly rejected the city's proposal to annex a 111-acre area stretching along Interstate 680 from Highway 4 north to the BNSF railroad overcrossing.

On Wednesday, the City Council will consider two options. The first is annexing the same area in North Pacheco. The second is expanding that area by about 110 acres along Blum Road, plus nearly 530 acres around Vine Hill and Arthur Road and the 185-acre Mountain View neighborhood.

The council meeting is at 7 p.m. at City Hall, 525 Henrietta St.

Acting as the Annexation Subcommittee, Councilmembers Mark Ross and AnaMarie Avila Farias came up with the two proposals.

"I think we should go ahead with the annexation piece we have in place and then seek further annexation opportunities, not only there, but also in the Mountain View area, where we have a chunk of residents that are encircled by Martinez," Ross said.

"Why isn't that area in Martinez? It doesn't make sense to me," he continued. "It's probably a couple thousand people that are basically surrounded land locked by the city of Martinez boundary."

Farias could not be reached for comment.

City leaders have had their eyes on North Pacheco since 2009 because they believe the area is ripe for commercial development. A short distance east off of Highway 4, thousands of housing units and 6 million square feet of commercial space are planned for the former Concord Naval Weapons Station land. They also relish the opportunity to clean up an entrance to Martinez.

But a group of North Pacheco residents who believed annexation would lead to poorly maintained roads, longer police response times and higher property taxes forced the city to hold an election. Other critics said the annexation would be a bad deal for Martinez, as costs to provide police protection and other services to North Pacheco were initially projected to exceed the property tax and sales tax revenue the area generates.

In August 2012, the Contra Costa County elections division mailed 150 ballots to registered voters and landowners in the proposed annexation area. The vote was 40-39 against becoming part of Martinez.

The city spent nearly \$105,000 on consultant fees and other costs associated with the North Pacheco annexation effort. While some of that work would still be useful if an application for annexation is resubmitted to the Contra Costa County Local Agency Formation Commission, city staffers estimate it could cost \$25,000 to update some of the studies.

LAFCO commissioners could approve the North Pacheco annexation a year from now if residents don't force another vote. If they do, the election likely would happen in spring or summer 2015,

according to city staff.

Pursuing the second option of annexing all three areas would mean starting over from scratch. Staffers estimate it would cost \$155,000 to \$180,000 and take at least three years to put together.

Lisa P. White covers Martinez and Pleasant Hill. Contact her at 925-943-8011. Follow her at [Twitter.com/lisa_p_white](https://twitter.com/lisa_p_white).

Hercules City Manager Steve Duran picked for Antioch job

By Paul Burgarino and Tom Lochner Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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Antioch has found a new administrator to lead City Hall, leaving Hercules scrambling for a replacement.

The East Contra Costa city announced Monday it has hired Steve Duran, the current city manager in Hercules, to replace retiring Jim Jakel.

All contract terms have been agreed upon, and the Antioch City Council is expected to formally approve the hire Dec. 10.

While the announcement signals a smooth transition in Antioch's day-to-day leadership, it leaves beleaguered Hercules with more uncertainty only two years after it hired Duran to help lead it out of crisis.

Antioch Mayor Wade Harper said Monday that Duran's experience with financial challenges, economic development and budget skills, particularly as Antioch looks to implement a recently passed half-cent sales tax for public safety, made him the best fit for city manager.

"He's going to be able to hit the ground running," said Harper, noting that Duran already has extensive county contacts and familiarity with issues important to Antioch such as proposed ferry expansion and the county's waterfront plan.

"There were so many positives, it let me know in my gut that this is the right person to lead us into the future," Harper said.

Duran, 58, added that his nine years in Richmond from 2002 to 2011 as economic development and redevelopment director gave him experience addressing some of the crime and blight issues facing Antioch.

In Duran's two years at the helm in Hercules, the city eliminated a \$1.1 million structural general fund deficit and moved forward on an Intermodal Transit Center project and a Safeway-anchored shopping center. His job was also to help restore public trust after years of alleged mismanagement and cronyism that resulted in an FBI investigation and lawsuit by the city against former City Manager Nelson Oliva and his family company that was recently settled for \$3.15 million.

"It's always a hard decision to leave because there's never a time when you feel everything is done," Duran said.

In addition to the lure of a bigger city and salary, Duran said he was drawn to Antioch despite its challenges because the city's leadership "has things going in the right direction," and he wants to help continue that.

Meanwhile, Hercules leaders expressed concern Monday about how the city will cope with Duran's departure just as it is trying to put its financial house in order.

"It couldn't have come at a worse time," Councilman Dan Romero said. "We were a house of cards

barely standing. Now, the middle card is being pulled out.

"I wish him well, but the timing is really bad. It poses a great financial danger to the city."

Romero said many issues are pending right now, such as fulfilling the terms of a settlement with bond insurer Ambac, a land deal for 17.25 acres and a residential-and-retail project, and he fears there's "a strong possibility" deals could be lost.

Duran said the Hercules deals "are in good hands," as the hired consultants are some of the best real estate professionals in the state.

City leaders are also worried because there is no one to fill Duran's job in an interim role. Hercules Mayor John Delgado said he is calling a special City Council meeting Tuesday to address the situation.

"Obviously, I wish we had an assistant city manager to take the reins," Delgado said. The absence of an assistant city manager has been a topic of concern, he added.

Duran said he has already started working with city leaders on lining up some potential candidates to serve as interim city manager.

Duran's current employment contract is for three years, beginning in October 2011, and he said it contains a clause obligating him to give 60 days notice if he quits.

In his resignation letter to Hercules, Duran asked that his final working day be Jan. 6. Otherwise, his last day will be Jan. 31.

In the upcoming discussion of Duran's exit plan, Romero said he will ask that Antioch compensate Hercules if Duran leaves early.

Before returning to West Contra Costa, where he was raised, Duran worked for four years with San Jose's redevelopment agency and before that in the private sector in real estate and business management for 23 years.

Duran's compensation package includes an annual salary of \$230,000, which will be cut to \$207,000 until city furloughs are discontinued, and a one-year severance package. His base annual salary in Hercules was \$193,239 in 2012, according to this newspaper's public employees salary database.

"I wish Steve the best," Delgado said. "Antioch is getting a good city manager."

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