

Poll results show poor support for fire district tax

Kyle Szymanski | [Posted 2/12/2014](#)

The results of a recent survey indicate voters wouldn't come to the rescue of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD) if it was to place a parcel tax measure on the June ballot.

Only 54 percent of voters are in favor of the tax, according to the results of a recent poll of about 300 district residents. The tax of approximately \$100 a year would require a two-thirds majority to pass.

"Unfortunately, I am not surprised," said Vince Wells, president of the International Association of Firefighters Local 1230, which paid for a polling firm to conduct the scientific study of likely voters with equal representation of the communities in the district. "We suspected not a lot of change. That was part of the reason why we decided to do the poll so we could get the question answered and move on to work on something else."

The district board now plans to send an educational mailer with an attached survey to all 44,000-district parcel owners to solicit a larger number of opinions before deciding if it should proceed with the measure.

The results of the poll, however, are a discouraging first sign for the district, which is banking on the revenue to maintain current service levels after federal grant money runs out in November, according to district leaders.

Without additional funding, it's expected the board will be asked to close two of the district's five stations, likely leaving just three engines to serve a 249-square-mile coverage area. About 95 percent of the district's revenue comes from property taxes, which have decreased about 40 percent since the value of homes started to dip around 2008.

"We knew the results were going to be low, but I don't know if I expected them to be as low as they did come in," said Fire Chief Hugh Henderson. "People aren't seeing the criticalness of what is going on in the district."

The poll results, which also revealed voters were not more inclined to vote for the tax even after they were informed of the ramifications of it not passing, are not entirely surprising based on the attendance at recent community outreach meetings, said ECCFPD board member Joe Young. Around 145 combined residents attended the seven gatherings held to discuss future service models and the finances of the district.

“I know it’s difficult to pass taxes,” Young said. “I think with the large amount of people not being fully aware of the situation with the fire district, that kind of result (of the poll) could be expected.”

Wells believes the current state of the district could be a sign its time for the area’s service to go in a different direction. He says currently its hard for all the different communities within the ECCFPD to get on the same page since their residents have different opinions, such as people in Bethel Island believing volunteer firefighters should be brought back and some Brentwood residents believing the city should start its own department. He believes more of the focus should be placed on looking into consolidating the ECCFPD with the neighboring Contra Costa County Fire Protection District or turning the responsibilities over to the cities to create their own departments.

“There are too many differences in opinion in each of the communities that they kind of counteract each other,” he said.

Young says the district board has asked the district’s recently-hired consultant to double check for viable options to bring in additional revenue, but it appears its only option is the parcel tax.

“We have really done everything that can be done as far as increasing efficiency of the fire district, looking for outside contract opportunities and minimizing pension and healthcare costs,” Young said. “All those actions have been taken by the board and the only thing left is to provide enough revenue to maintain the current service level.”

The district’s next board meeting is scheduled for March 3 at 6:30 p.m. inside the Oakley City Council Chambers.

Annexation moves ahead for 678 acres northeast of Antioch

By Paul Burgarino Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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MARTINEZ -- Antioch's plan to annex 678 acres to its northeast took a significant step forward this week, as no one protested the largest piece of a complex package becoming part of the city.

The lack of protest gave Contra Costa's Local Agency Formation Commission the green light Wednesday to annex 481 acres of industrial waterfront that includes two natural gas-fired power plants.

Now, all but 94 acres of waterfront land used mainly for marina and storage have been brought within city limits.

The second of three land swaths in question -- 103 acres near Viera Avenue -- was annexed last month, when commissioners from the agency that oversees local government boundary changes determined the area met the state's "land island" criteria and waived the right for the near 110 property owners to vote on the matter.

As for the marina land, the commission decided in a 6-1 vote that more community meetings are needed to address any concerns. It will reconsider the annexation next month.

"I would certainly like to see this commission provide that level of outreach and community engagement," Commissioner Mary Nejedly Piepho said.

Piepho, a county supervisor from Discovery Bay, said similar meetings in the Viera area helped educate and inform those residents.

"Otherwise, we would be pursuing an unfair action prematurely," she said.

Land zoning and taxes in the area would be the same following an annexation, city and county officials said. Antioch would also try to pursue grant funding to help residents with the cost of sewer line connections, Tina Wehrmeister, the city's community development director, said.

Views were mixed among those who spoke at Wednesday's meeting.

Don Wilson, commodore for the Sportsman Yacht Club, said his 200-member group opposes annexation. The city at one time didn't want to annex the area and things "have gone full circle," he said.

"We've peacefully coexisted with the county for 80 years. We'd like to continue that relationship," Wilson said. "If it's not broke, don't fix it."

Steve Klee, one of the owners of the New Bridge Marina, urged annexation.

Using a septic system for sewage is not an ideal solution, while having Antioch's police patrolling the area could stop drug sales at the nearby regional park and reduce boat burglaries, he said.

Antioch first applied for annexation of the industrial piece of land in 2007, but was later directed by the formation commission to include the Viera area, which drew international attention in 2009

because of the Jaycee Dugard kidnapping.

Local leaders see the area as a golden opportunity to boost its economy, estimating it could yield nearly \$1 million in net tax revenue each year and provide other economic opportunities on the waterfront.

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Moraga-Orinda fire chief to ask for pay cut

By Jennifer Modenessi jmodenessi@bayareanewsgroup.com Contra Costa Times

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MORAGA -- Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Stephen Healy will ask the board of directors Wednesday for a temporary 9.5 percent pay cut to his base salary.

According to a district report, Healy is requesting the salary reduction in response to a projected district general fund deficit in fiscal year 2014-15. The district estimated a \$523,227 deficit if it does not act to reduce costs.

At a meeting Feb. 5, governing board members approved reducing district costs by June 30. If Healy's pay is reduced, the chief's base salary will be \$199,100 beginning July 1 and lasting until June 30, 2015. The board greenlighted Healy's five-year contract in November; the approval allows officials to negotiate the chief's salary if they decide to implement across-the-board pay cuts.

The 9.5 percent reduction is the same proposed by the district for union firefighters in a "last, best and final proposal" made during contract negotiations that have since deadlocked.

Representatives of United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County, Local 1230, have said the district proposed a 7.5 percent across-the-board base salary cut effective July 1. That contract included no salary range changes in fiscal year 2015-16 and would expire June 30, 2016.

A second offer included across-the-board pay cuts of 9.5 percent for a short-term contract through June 30, 2015. The meeting starts at 7 p.m. at the Moraga library community room, 1500 St. Marys Road.

California drought: Why is there no mandatory water rationing?

By Paul Rogers progers@mercurynews.com San Jose Mercury News

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Fourteen months into a historic drought, with reservoirs running low and the Sierra snowpack 27 percent of normal, a growing number of Californians are wondering: Why isn't everyone being forced to ration?

So far, Gov. Jerry Brown and most major water providers, from the Bay Area to Los Angeles, are calling for voluntary cuts -- not mandatory rationing with fines for excessive use.

"I've been astounded," said Jay Geis, a Cupertino sales executive who said his friends and neighbors also are surprised by the lack of urgency. "Just drive by any reservoir and it's horrifying. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand we're in a drought."

Yet when it comes to water in California, there's no one-size-fits-all answer to explain why rationing hasn't taken hold. While three utilities provide 80 percent of Californians' electricity, there are roughly 3,000 water providers statewide, all with different rules, political realities and needs. Some are cities. Some are corporations. Some are farm districts pumping from wells. Some have significant amounts of water stored up and some don't. But all of their bottom lines depend on selling water, not conserving. And as difficult as the economics of rationing are, the politics may be even more complex.

"Generally people prefer voluntary to mandatory conservation," said Jeff Kightlinger, general manager of Metropolitan Water District, which provides water to 19 million people in the Los Angeles and San Diego areas. "They don't like being dictated to. If we go to mandatory in February and it rains solid in March and we say 'never mind,' people won't listen. We want to save the big hammer for when we know it's really bad."

Local agencies can order rationing. So can governors. But no California governor has ever ordered mandatory water rationing statewide, and there are huge legal questions about how it would work or whether any governor could even enforce the rules, particularly on farmers and their private wells.

"Most of the power in water management is at the local level," said Jay Lund, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at UC Davis. "Oftentimes you can get 10 or 20 percent water conservation out of a serious voluntary effort. It's less costly and is less of a political headache for most agencies. That's why they want to do voluntary first."

Some crackdowns

A few communities have embraced strict rules. On Jan. 28, the St. Helena City Council ordered mandatory rationing, limiting each house to 65 gallons a person per day -- one-third the state average -- with warnings for first offenses, then fines of \$374 for every 748 gallons above the limit. For the fifth offense, the fines triple.

"The message to the public right now is, 'Hey, no more kidding around.' We need to be very, very serious," Mayor Ann Nevero said that day.

Within two weeks, city water use fell 33 percent.

Sacramento enacted 20 percent "mandatory" restrictions. But because half the homes there still don't have water meters, the city has no way to set water limits and fine users. Instead, city leaders limited days for landscape watering, and staff members issue tickets of up to \$1,000 to violators.

Most Bay Area residents have only 10 percent voluntary restrictions in place -- including all the customers of the Santa Clara Valley Water District, East Bay Municipal Utility District and San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which supplies Hetch Hetchy water. Some locals say it's time to go further.

"People in the government agencies don't understand how bad it could be," said Vincent Lui, a retired engineer in Los Altos who suffered through severe water shortages 60 years ago while growing up in Hong Kong. "They don't seem to be taking this thing too seriously. We need to get tough quickly. We need to hit people where it hurts, in the pocketbooks."

Reasons why

Experts say there are several key reasons why mandatory rationing is rare.

First, most big urban districts are in better shape now than during the last major drought from 1987 to 1992. They have increased conservation and supplies.

"We're light years away from then," said Kightlinger.

In the past 20 years, Los Angeles' Metropolitan Water District built the massive Diamond Valley reservoir in Riverside County, a \$2 billion project that stores enough water for 5 million people a year. By expanding recycled wastewater and pushing conservation measures, the district delivered 25 percent less water last year than in 1990, even though the population grew by 5 million people.

The Contra Costa Water District in 1998 built Los Vaqueros Reservoir, which holds enough water for up to 800,000 people a year. And over the past 20 years, the Santa Clara Valley Water District has methodically stored nearly two years' supply underground.

Second, when people use less, agencies' revenues drop.

The Santa Clara Valley Water District estimates it will lose up to \$20 million because of its request last month for a 10 percent voluntary reduction. L.A.'s Metropolitan district expects to lose \$150 million by asking for 20 percent voluntary cutbacks.

In the past, agencies have sometimes raised rates to make up the difference.

"People say, 'What! You made us conserve and now you are raising the rates?!'" said Jerry Meral, former deputy director of the state Department of Water Resources. "But they still have to pay the staff and run the agency."

Third, enforcing mandatory rationing is a political nightmare. Almost any plan a district undertakes will spur objections; people complain that if they've already been efficient all along they'll have a harder time meeting lower targets than their water-wasting neighbors.

And finally, many water agencies are still hoping that new storms in February, March and April

might bail them out, along with voluntary measures.

"It may well be that more stringent and serious measures are taken later," said Andrea Pook, a spokeswoman for the East Bay Municipal Utility District. "This is very early."

Governor's power

When the governor declared a water emergency on Jan. 17, he called for statewide 20 percent voluntary cutbacks.

"As we go down the road -- you know, January, February, March -- we will keep our eye on the ball and intensify, even to the point of mandatory conservation," Brown said. "But we're not going to do that quite yet."

However, the governor's office declined to provide details on how Brown would order cities, counties, private companies and farmers to use less water.

Legal experts say the issue is amazingly complex. Farmers use 80 percent of the water that people consume in California, for example. Yet there are no state laws regulating groundwater pumping, so it's not clear what would happen if the governor tried to order farms to cut back. Private companies would almost certainly demand taxpayers bail them out if they were ordered to sell less water, just as a car dealer would if the government ordered him to sell fewer cars.

"The lawsuits would last longer than the drought," said Barton "Buzz" Thompson, a law professor at Stanford University.

In 1977, during his first term as governor -- and in a severe drought -- Brown asked his attorney general whether he even had the legal power to impose mandatory rationing. Yes, wrote then-Attorney General Evelle Younger in an opinion, under the same laws that governors can invoke in earthquakes and fires. But with a caveat: The law requires taxpayers "to pay the reasonable value" of any private property the state takes.

Back then, the governor's office was considering imposing a "pump tax" on all private farm wells to save water, but the stakes were high, said J. Anthony Kline, who served as Brown's legal affairs secretary in 1977.

"You are talking about a major political interest and what was one of the biggest industries in the state -- agriculture," said Kline, now a state appeals court justice. "Any governor, Democrat or Republican, is loathe to impose strict measures on ag. It was a grave decision, and you didn't want to pull that trigger."

Ultimately, Kline said, Brown's biggest influence on how California consumes water may hinge more on what he says than what he does.

"It's politically complicated and legally complicated," he said. "The one thing the governor has that's most useful is the bully pulpit."

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Orinda leaders look once again to voters to fund road repairs

By Jennifer Modenessi Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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ORINDA -- Buoyed by the results of a recent survey showing voters are willing to pay for continuing repairs to the city's notoriously bad roads, Orinda city leaders are moving forward with a \$20 million bond measure for the June ballot.

While the City Council stopped short of authorizing the measure, its unanimous vote Feb. 4 to pursue the bond issuance allows city staffers to return with ballot language at the next council meeting Tuesday. Council members also asked staffers for an update of the city's 10-year roads and drainage repairs plan showing the expected impact of the bond measure. City leaders will then take a final vote whether to place the measure -- which would require voters to pay an annual ad valorem tax on assessed property value -- on the ballot.

The council's decision corresponds with the second phase of the city's 10-year roads and drainage repair plan, a document approved by Orinda council members in 2012 that outlines how the city plans to fund the repair of storm drains and roads rated as some of the Bay Area's worst. The first phase of the four-step plan is a half-cent sales tax that sunsets in 10 years. Voters approved that tax in 2012.

The next two phases call for \$19.8 million bond or parcel tax measures -- one in 2016 and the other in 2020 -- to fund repairs. The final step asks voters to extend in 2022 the half-cent sales tax for an as-yet undetermined length of time.

The council's move to push up the timeline of the 2016 bond measure followed a presentation by Oakland-based polling firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates explaining the results of a phone survey conducted last month.

The opinion poll asked 400 Orinda residents about potential ballot measures, including bonds of \$10 million, \$20 million and \$40 million.

A total of 70 percent of residents polled indicated they would support a \$20 million bond; 24 percent said no and 6 percent were undecided. A slightly higher percent of voters supported a \$10 million bond but only 43 percent backed a \$40 million bond. A successful bond measure requires two-thirds voter approval to pass.

The survey also asked residents about two related measures that would make Orinda a charter city solely so a real estate transfer tax could be established.

The 1.5 percent transfer tax would be assessed on the sale of a home, and the proceeds would fully fund public road and storm drain repairs, according to the survey.

But poll results show voters overwhelmingly opposed the transfer tax and charter city measures, even when told it would be possible to repeal the half-cent sales tax as that funding would no longer be necessary.

"It seems very unlikely in my estimation that those measures, even with strong campaigns behind

them, would reach the threshold needed to win approval," said polling analyst David Metz, who explained earlier that survey results overall had about a 5 percent margin of error. A total of 56 percent of residents polled opposed the charter city idea, and 67 percent said no to the transfer tax.

Still, supporters of those measures urged the council to defer a decision on the bond measure, calling survey conclusions that there is sufficient voter support to pass it "misguided."

Resident Art Haigh argued that wording in the survey implied the bond measures would fix the city's infrastructure problem, and said the funding was inadequate. He also said a bond measure funded by an ad valorem property tax would likely fail to reach two-thirds voter approval; voters rejected similar bond measures in 2006 and 2007 for \$59.1 million and \$58.6 million, respectively.

Haigh also said he feels the transfer tax was not "adequately explained" in the polling question. "It set up a false choice," he said, and asked the council to defer their decision until they and the public have heard a "thorough explanation of a real honest solution" and not a "Band-Aid" to Orinda's infrastructure funding problem.

It costs the city about \$2.2 million annually in Measure J, gas tax and transportation and drainage impact fees to maintain its heavily used arterials, collector and school routes. According to public works director Charles Swanson, \$20 million would fund repair of about a third of the city's residential streets, which rate poorly on an industry standard "pavement condition index."

The city also says sales tax proceeds are higher than anticipated, and repairs funded by those proceeds will likely begin in May.

Barnidge: The incredible shrinking East Contra Costa Fire District

By Tom Barnidge Contra Costa Times Columnist Contra Costa Times
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The East Contra Costa Fire District is not yet on life support, but the next of kin has been notified, and a priest is standing by with a Bible.

The same budget woes that forced the agency to shrink from eight fire stations to five soon may mean two more closures. That would leave three units -- nine on-duty firefighters -- to safeguard more than 100,000 residents spanning 250 square miles, from Oakley to Brentwood to Discovery Bay.

A structure fire usually requires at least 15 firefighters, so this isn't good.

Contraction was forestalled two years ago, thanks to a federal SAFER grant, but when that expires in November, so do any chances of balancing the budget -- unless a new funding source is uncovered.

"I'm concerned that our citizens don't fully understand the dilemma this district faces in providing services," board member Ronald Johansen said.

Fire district detractors often blame hefty salaries and benefits for its budget problems -- the assertion has some merit -- but East Contra Costa's issues are more complicated. (Its firefighters, by the way, are paid substantially less than those in neighboring districts.)

A structural funding problem plagues East Contra Costa, which was classified as a rural area when Proposition 13 passed in 1978 and retained that classification even as cities incorporated and populations swelled. Rural fire districts get a smaller cut of taxes.

"For the most part, our district collects about 6 cents of every property tax dollar, while suburban and urban areas collect 12 or 13 cents," said Brentwood Councilman Erick Stonebarger. "We all pay property taxes; it just gets allocated differently."

That's why fire board members find themselves pondering the never-popular option of a parcel tax -- targeted at about \$100 per year for five years. The last time they went to the voters, in 2012, only 43.6 percent favored a measure that requires a two-thirds majority. A recent survey found support remains way short of the two-thirds mark.

Fire board President Joel Bryant, who's also Brentwood's vice mayor, said he shares residents' dislike of taxes, but the cost pales alongside the risk of substandard protection and response times.

"I've been accused of using scare tactics to get this passed," he said, "but the reality is this is very scary. When you call 911, you should have a reasonable expectation that an emergency response vehicle can get there in time."

Oakley Councilwoman Diane Burgis surely agrees. She remembers when her 3-year-old son, Sam, suffered an allergic reaction that caused him such difficulty breathing it appeared a tracheotomy might be needed.

"The firefighters were at my house in two minutes," she said. "They treated him and got him through it. I fear someone might have a situation like that in the future, and responders won't get there in time."

East Contra Costa officials note that when the district was evaluated by outside consultants a decade ago, they recommended it staff 10 fire stations. The number now is half that and headed lower.

"I know San Francisco is different because of its density," Johansen said, "but it has 49 stations for 49 square miles. We're looking at three stations for 250 square miles."

A parcel tax has yet to be formally proposed. Board members wonder if they can generate support.

"Nobody cares about this until it affects them," Oakley Mayor Randy Pope said. "It's never a big deal until something's burning."

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Contra Costa County getting a big chunk of new parkland

Carolyn Jones

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When Whitney Dotson was a kid growing up in Richmond in the 1950s, he and his friends would tromp through the canyons and oak forests of the East Bay hills to go fishing at San Pablo Reservoir.

Now, thanks in part to Dotson's help, those hills are preserved forever - a 362-acre swath of pristine woodlands and ridgetops that's the largest park acquisition in western Contra Costa County in 35 years.

"I know firsthand the benefits of that open space. It's just a beautiful resource," Dotson, 68, who represents western Contra Costa on the East Bay Regional Park District board, said Sunday. "This is a tremendous benefit for the entire district, but especially for the people of Richmond."

The property had been slated for housing, 36 homes that would have extended the Canyon Oaks subdivision in unincorporated El Sobrante. But the developer went bankrupt, and the park district was able to purchase the land for \$1.45 million - half the appraised fair-market value.

New staging, trailhead

The property will become part of the adjacent Wildcat Canyon Regional Park, bringing the park's total acreage to 2,789, and provide a link to parks across San Pablo Dam Road, including Kennedy Grove Regional Recreation Area and San Pablo Reservoir.

The district plans to build a staging area and trailhead on San Pablo Dam Road, giving residents of Richmond and El Sobrante an easy place to hike into Wildcat Canyon, Tilden Regional Park and beyond.

"It's going to provide great access for people on the east side of the ridge. And we got it for a great price," said Liz Musbach, land acquisition manager for the park district. "This will round out and complete the eastern boundary of Wildcat Canyon."

After the real estate crash a few years ago, park and open space districts across California were able to scoop up land at bargain prices from developers desperate to unload their properties. But most of those new parks have been in the outer suburbs, where the housing market crashed the hardest and open space - much of it former ranch land - was more available.

In the East Bay, park districts purchased huge tracts around Mount Diablo, especially the eastern side, and Sonoma County's open space district has saved thousands of acres, from the coast to the hilltops east of Santa Rosa.

That's why the Richmond purchase is so noteworthy, Musbach and others said. The chance to buy a large tract of open space in a densely populated, urban area is rare but critical for the people who live there, she said.

Dotson said housing is important, especially for Richmond, but open space is more important.

"Homes should be built in the existing developments," he said. "Open space should not be used for private homes. It should be enjoyed by everyone - a beautiful place to take a walk, enjoy the quiet, relax."

Wildlife, views

The new park is a steep collection of hillsides and canyons spilling east from the ridgetop. It's a dense mix of laurels, oaks and native grass, fed by seasonal streams and ponds. On a recent visit, the croaking of frogs was almost deafening.

Mountain lions, coyote, deer, hawks, a variety of snakes and other creatures roam the property, taking advantage of the open-space corridor that stretches almost seamlessly from Richmond to Castro Valley.

From the ridgetop, visitors have 360-degree views of Mount Diablo, San Francisco Bay and Carquinez Strait, the mountains of Sonoma and Napa counties, and the Berkeley hills.

"This park means more access, more open space, more chances to enjoy this scenic beauty," said Justin Neville, supervisor of Wildcat Canyon.

At the same time the district purchased the Richmond property, it also bought a 165-acre property nearby, not far from Kennedy Grove and Sobrante Ridge. The smaller property, also part of a "distressed" developer portfolio, cost the district \$850,000, about 86 percent of its fair-market value, Musbach said.

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California drought: Feds say farmers won't get any Central Valley Project water this year

By Paul Rogers progers@mercurynews.com San Jose Mercury News
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In a crushing reminder of the state's parched plight, federal officials announced Friday that the Central Valley Project -- California's largest water delivery system -- will provide no water this year to Central Valley farmers and only 50 percent of the contracted amount to urban areas such as Santa Clara and Contra Costa counties.

Farmers had been bracing for the bad news because California received less rain in 2013 than any year since it became a state in 1850. Despite some storms this month, the state is still grappling with low reservoirs and a Sierra Nevada snowpack that's 25 percent of normal.

Friday's announcement will particularly affect San Joaquin Valley farmers who are last in line to get federal water. Many will have to either heavily pump already overburdened wells, or let fields go unplanted this summer.

"California produces almost half of the nation's fresh fruits and vegetables. And without adequate water in California, food supplies from other states or other countries may be the only option to fill the gap," said Mike Wade, executive director of the California Farm Water Coalition.

Wade predicted that farmers will leave 500,000 acres of land unplanted this year. Statewide, there are 8.1 million acres that farmers irrigate, and in many places they will produce crops this year with groundwater and local supplies.

Regions that rely heavily on federal water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, such as Fresno, Merced and Kings counties, will be hit the hardest.

Friday's announcement followed a similar one last month in which state officials announced that there would be zero deliveries from the State Water Project to cities and farms.

In a rare piece of good news, however, the National Weather Service is now saying a significant storm system will reach California Wednesday through Saturday. Rainfall could range from 2 to 5 inches across the state.

For many communities, which have received barely a third of their normal rainfall since July, three or four more storms of similar size are needed to bring rainfall totals to normal levels.

"We're not through the winter yet," said Pete Lucero, a spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the federal agency that made Friday's announcement. "Miracle Marches have happened before, and we're all hoping for one this year."

If the state receives significant rain and snow, the federal water delivery totals will be increased in the coming months, Lucero said. That happened in 2009, when federal water allocations were set at zero for most farmers in the San Joaquin Valley after a third dry year in a row, then bumped up to 10 percent of normal by April. Rains the following year increased that to 45 percent in 2010 and 80 percent in 2011.

The Central Valley Project -- which was built starting in the 1930s and moves water from Lake

Shasta to Bakersfield through dams, canals and pumps -- provides 90 percent of its water to farms. In dry years, cities receive priority over farms.

"We are trying to ensure that public health and safety needs are met," Lucero said. "This is not a field that can go fallow. This is your children and my children being able to have enough drinking water."

Water districts in the Bay Area that buy federal water said they expected Friday's news and will cope.

The Santa Clara Valley Water District, which has asked 1.8 million people to cut water use 10 percent, will consider expanding that to 20 percent on Tuesday, spokesman Marty Grimes said.

But the district has a year's supply in the ground because it saved it during wet years, as well as some water in its 10 local reservoirs. So a reduction in its federal water won't cause an emergency, Grimes said.

Similarly, the Contra Costa Water District will get by, said spokeswoman Jennifer Allen. The district has a contract for 170,000 acre-feet of federal water. It will receive 85,000 under Friday's announcement. But the district's total demand is between 100,000 and 120,000 a year. So with conservation, and supplies in the district's Los Vaqueros Reservoir, completed in 1998, demand will be met.

"We have enough water to take care of all indoor use and business needs, but customers will need to focus on conservation in outdoor water use," she said.

Meanwhile, new details about the \$687.4 million drought aid package -- unveiled earlier this week by Gov. Jerry Brown and Democratic legislative leaders -- indicate that more than a third of the money will be distributed over the next few months.

Once Brown signs the legislation into law, the Department of Water Resources will immediately begin reviewing applications for \$200 million to fund projects that improve regional drought preparedness or boost drinking water quality.

Towns at risk of running out of water will be eligible for \$15 million for emergency drinking water supplies, and Californians struggling to pay their rent, mortgages or grocery bills will have access to more than \$50 million in housing, food assistance and job training aid right away. But funding for other water conservation projects may not trickle out of the state's coffers until this summer.

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Contra Costa Fire District lands \$9.6 million federal grant

By Tom Lochner Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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PLEASANT HILL -- The Contra Costa Fire District has been awarded a federal grant of almost \$9.6 million to hire firefighters, the latest in a series of such awards to East Bay fire agencies over the past two years.

"This major grant is a huge boost to the local fire department," Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, said this week in a statement announcing the award. "The ranks of first responders in California have been spread thin by numerous wildfires, the economic downturn, and now dry and dangerous drought conditions."

The county fire district applied for the grant, under the Federal Emergency Management Agency's SAFER program, hoping to hire 27 firefighters, ConFire Chief Jeff Carman said Friday.

ConFire currently has 302 full-time budgeted positions, but only 283 were filled as of late last month, according to district spokesman Lewis Broschard. The district, which covers 304 square miles, operated 28 stations and 30 crews just a few years ago. Today, it operates 23 stations, with 23 three-person crews, or 69 firefighters, on duty each day, Broschard said.

Last week, the Rodeo-Hercules Fire District won a SAFER grant of almost \$2.5 million and the Alameda County Fire Department one of almost \$4.2 million. Last year, SAFER grants of \$1.24 million went to the Pinole Fire Department and \$1.15 million to the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. The East Contra Costa Fire District received a \$7.8 million SAFER grant in 2012.

Some advocates of fire reform say the grants allow fire departments to continue to do business as usual and avoid or delay making needed reforms, including curbing personnel costs.

"Until the fire districts reduce compensation to levels that 1) have public support; and 2) are affordable within current revenues (without dipping into reserves), they will continue on their path to bankruptcy," ConFire district resident Wendy Lack said in an email last week.

Lack made similar points among more than three pages of public comment to a consultant's study of the fire district, known as the Fitch report, that will be formally presented to the county board of supervisors on Tuesday.

According to this newspaper's public employee salaries database, more than 160 ConFire employees each cost the district \$200,000 or more in base salary plus overtime, health coverage, employer pension contributions and other benefits in 2012, the latest year for which data are available. Top on the list was a fire captain who earned \$176,744 in overtime on top of a \$109,318 base salary.

Benefits, pension contributions and other employer payments brought the captain's total cost of employment to \$404,182 that year.

Miller's spokesman, Peter Whippy, in an email Friday, said ConFire was awarded its grant "on the basis of, among other criteria, financial need, impact on operation and cost benefit."

"The issue of having funds available to hire adequate levels of firefighters today is entirely separate

from the long-term county budgetary issues and shouldn't be conflated," Whippy added.

Carman, in an email Friday, said he sees SAFER grants as "a way to bridge the present and the future," noting that the district has set up an in-house strategic planning committee to study the business plan and look for efficiencies and other revenue sources, and ways to be innovative.

Contact Tom Lochner at 510-262-2760. Follow him at twitter.com/tomlochner

Hercules: Congressman will deliver \$2.5 million federal firefighting grant at firehouse ceremony

By Tom Lochner Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Saturday, February 22, 2014
ContraCostaTimes.com

HERCULES -- Rep. Mike Thompson, D-Napa, will present a federal grant of almost \$2.5 million to the Rodeo-Hercules fire department at a firehouse ceremony Monday.

The so-called SAFER grant, which is spread over two years, will enable the department to hire seven firefighters and reopen the Rodeo fire station, Thompson said in a news release announcing Monday's ceremony.

Thompson urged approval of the funds in an October 2013 letter to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's administrator at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, according to the news release.

The event will be held at 2:30 p.m. at the district office at the Hercules fire station, 1680 Refugio Valley Road.

Fire Chief Charles Hanley and local elected officials are expected to attend the ceremony, which is open to the public.

Rodeo-Hercules is an independent district with its own elected, five-member governing board. Thompson's congressional district covers all or part of Contra Costa, Lake, Napa, Solano and Sonoma Counties.

Contact Tom Lochner at 510-262-2760. Follow him at twitter.com/tomlochner

Moraga-Orinda fire board approves chief's pay cut

By Jennifer Modenessi Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Sunday, February 23, 2014
ContraCostaTimes.com

MORAGA -- A temporary pay cut requested by Moraga-Orinda Fire Chief Stephen Healy isn't sitting well with firefighters and paramedics who say Healy's cut still isn't equal to salary reductions they fear could be imposed on firefighters by the district after a bargaining impasse.

Board President John Wyro and directors Kathleen Famulener and Fred Weil on Feb. 19 approved the 9.5 percent one-year pay cut voluntarily requested by Healy in response to the district's bleak finances. The district faces a \$523,227 general fund deficit at the beginning of next fiscal year.

"I didn't want it to look like a gimmick, but at the end of the day, I think due to the financial condition of the district -- particularly the general fund budget in '14-15 -- that I should lead from the front," Healy told directors, the public and district firefighters and paramedics crowded inside the Moraga Library community room Wednesday night. His cut comes from an annual base salary of \$220,000.

"I think the chief did what a leader should do," said director Steve Anderson, who wasn't at the meeting. "He's not asking the rank and file to do something that he himself would not do."

Union members disagree. Mark DeWeese, a district firefighter and district representative of United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County Local 1230, said Healy's 9.5 percent cut is not on par with the 9.5 percent reduction the union fears the board will impose on firefighters and paramedics.

DeWeese says the proposed 9.5 pay cut to the rank and file will leave them with 2 percent less than what they were making in 2006. For the chief's cut to be comparable, DeWeese claims, Healy would have to make 2 percent less than the fire chief's 2006 salary and take a deeper cut.

"The board seems to be marketing this ... as the same proposed pay cut that they're threatening to impose on the firefighters," DeWeese said. "So while I appreciate the chief's willingness to cut his pay back down 9.5 percent to \$199,000, he's about \$33,000 short of putting it on par with what he and the board are trying to force the rest of us to take."

District leaders unanimously approved Healy's five-year contract Nov. 20. The approval raised the district's former division chief of operations' base salary of \$153,400 to \$220,000; Healy's predecessor, Randy Bradley, earned a base salary of \$189,600 before leaving in July.

According to Local 1230 leadership, the district has proposed a 9.5 percent across-the-board pay cut to union member salaries for one year beginning July 1. The union says the district pitched that "last, best and final proposal" after suggesting firefighters and paramedics take a 7.5 percent across-the-board pay reduction starting July 1 for two years, with no salary range changes in fiscal year 2015-16. Union members say the district's wasteful spending has put a financial burden on safety personnel.

District officials have also proposed health care changes and a new job classification for single-role paramedics who would replace a dozen firefighter-paramedic positions vacated through attrition, retirement or other departures, according to the union.

The district declared a negotiation impasse Jan. 28 after nearly four years of talks; health care

benefits and cost-of-living salary increases have remained frozen since 2010.

Wyro, the board president, told union members Wednesday that directors -- through their representatives -- are available to talk at any time, and what's "at issue" is "being able to sustain this district and these people."

Local 1230 President Vince Wells said the district and union have not talked since the impasse was declared, and believes the board is through talking. He added that the union plans to ask for mediation before a fact-finding process.

Barnidge: Everywhere you look, a fire district is in trouble

By Tom Barnidge Contra Costa Times Columnist Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Sunday, February 23, 2014
ContraCostaTimes.com

Hello and welcome to everyone's favorite serial: "What Else Can Go Wrong With Our Fire Districts?" In the latest installment, firefighters and management are exchanging furrowed brows over contract terms in the Moraga-Orinda district.

The fire board, staring at a ledger that shows a lot more money going out than coming in, seems inclined to impose a last, best offer of a 9½ percent cut in pay. Firefighters, who haven't seen a raise in six years, even as their health care costs have ballooned, have looked upon this as they might a coiled rattlesnake.

The problem, as always, is funding -- just as it has been in the Contra Costa Fire District, the East County Fire District and almost any other fire district you can name. Property assessments and taxes may finally be on the rebound, but they can't rebound fast enough to overcome a five-year swoon or overtake growing retirement debts.

The MOFD showdown has been simmering for weeks, but it came to low boil at a district meeting Wednesday night, when Chief Stephen Healy may have inadvertently fanned the flames by offering to take the same percentage cut as asked of his staffers.

Here's the difference: Four months ago, when he was promoted from division chief, Healy's annual pay jumped 44 percent (from \$153,000 to \$220,000), so his follow-my-lead gesture doesn't ring quite the same as giving up 9½ percent of wages that have remained static since 2008.

Firefighters are also aware that times haven't been as hard in this district as they have in others. MOFD has a capital surplus of more than \$3 million, even after dipping into it to balance this year's budget and purchasing land for a new station that may or may not be built.

Attendees took turns at the microphone speaking in support of their firefighters. A former Moraga policewoman applauded their "professionalism, quality of care and tremendous compassion." A 28-year resident thanked them for running up a long, steep driveway, where cars blocked their truck, to provide emergency care to her mother-in-law. A man reflected on a fellow firefighter who'd lost his life in the line of duty.

It's difficult to find a villain in this story. This isn't about greedy workers demanding better working conditions and more money.

It isn't about heartless bosses eliminating jobs.

There isn't even a strong sentiment of us vs. them. District president John Wyro said the thought of imposing a pay cut on firefighters "kind of tears me up. These are our guys. I'm hoping we can find an amicable solution."

This situation, in microcosm, is what's facing jurisdictions throughout the state. You can blame political leaders for promising retirees money they didn't have. You can blame the same leaders for being as prepared for an economic downturn as they were for an alien space invasion. You can blame an inefficient public safety model gravely in need of a makeover.

We've invented smartphones and apps that bring the world to our fingertips, but too often we still send a fire truck, ambulance and five responders to medical emergencies.

Negotiations will continue for the Moraga-Orinda district. A state fact-finding panel likely will be brought in to examine the district's resources and needs. Then, sometime before July 1, a resolution will emerge and life will go on.

There also will be resolutions at ConFire and East County. But none of them will come easily.

Contact Tom Barnidge at tbarnidge@bayareanewsgroup.com.

Consultant's report on Contra Costa fire district long on data, short on solutions, critics say

By Tom Lochner *Contra Costa Times*
Posted:

Monday, February 24, 2014
ContraCostaTimes.com

MARTINEZ -- A consultant's report on the Contra Costa fire district to be presented to the county Board of Supervisors on Tuesday is catching flak from several sides, mostly for what it doesn't say.

The report, by Fitch and Associates LLC, was supposed to propose ways to optimize emergency medical and fire response within current severe fiscal limitations.

But a taxpayers group complains that the study seems to concede the need for a tax initiative, likely in two or three years, without seriously tackling the causes of the district's financial woes. Meanwhile, the firefighters union blasts what it interprets as one of the report's findings, saying that "to give the impression that our response capabilities are adequate at current staffing levels is an insult to our profession."

ConFire covers a 304-square-mile territory with 23 stations and 23 three-person crews. The fiscal 2014-15 budget is projected at about \$106 million, with a \$10.2 million deficit. A November 2012 parcel tax measure that would have raised about \$17 million a year for the district fell short of the necessary two-thirds voter approval.

The report describes a service option that reconfigures some groups of two three-engine fire companies to groups of three two-person medical response vehicle crews, without affecting staffing. But altogether, critics say, the study is short on solutions.

"If the study was merely to collect data and display it in beautiful charts, graphs and tables, the consultant did an excellent job," Ken Hambrick, chairman of the Alliance of Contra Costa Taxpayers, wrote in a comment on the report. "If it was intended for the consultant to make recommendations that could be implemented, save money and help solve the District's financial quagmire, the study falls terribly short."

Hambrick said the study fails to address high salaries and benefits, or look into possibly contracting with CalFire and let American Medical Response handle medical calls. These days both AMR and ConFire respond to medical emergencies, often minutes or fractions of minutes apart.

Vince Wells, president of firefighters Local 1230, said the report does not reveal what is lost in response capability and crew safety by switching to two-person medical response crews.

ConFire Chief Jeff Carman, in an email last week, said he has safety concerns about converting "a three-person multi-tasking, multi-capability resource" into "a two-person single-task resource."

A two-person rescue squad arriving at a fire "won't wait for the next arriving engine and will go to work without the proper tools needed to do the job safely, which means they will do what they can even if it means doing it in an unsafe manner," he wrote.

Contact Tom Lochner at 510-262-2760 or tlochner@bayareanewsgroup.com. Follow him at [Twitter.com/tomlochner](https://twitter.com/tomlochner).

If you go:

What: Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors-Fire District Board

Where: County Administration Building, 651 Pine St., Room 107, Martinez

When: 2 p.m. Tuesday

To read the Fitch and Associates Contra Costa fire district study, go to <http://bit.ly/MpiaYM>. For a PowerPoint presentation, go to <http://bit.ly/1fOo39S>.

Tim Draper insists 'Six Californias' ballot measure is for real

By Josh Richman jrichman@bayareanewsgroup.com Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Tuesday, February 25, 2014
ContraCostaTimes.com

SAN MATEO -- Venture capitalist Tim Draper insisted again Monday that he's not just joking about his proposal to split California into six states.

The Secretary of State has now given Draper the go-ahead to start collecting signatures for his ballot measure, but the Silicon Valley tech investor offered mostly off-the-cuff answers at a news conference Monday when asked how he would run or fund a campaign that has generated plenty of media attention and a huge dose of "Is he really serious?" suspicion.

Draper said he hasn't yet decided whether to try for this November's ballot -- for which he'd effectively have to gather almost 808,000 voters' signatures by mid-April -- or try to put it on the 2016 ballot.

"What I'm proposing here is to bring us closer to our government," he said. "We are all better off with more local government -- local government is more efficient, it's more effective, it represents us better."

In areas from schools to prisons to public infrastructure, "we spend the most and we get the least" in California, said Draper, 55, of Atherton. "Leaving California the way it is, the status quo, is a crime."

His proposed measure would split California into six states, each with its own government; much of the Bay Area, plus Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, would become the state of Silicon Valley.

The northernmost parts of the state would become the state of Jefferson, as some counties up there have wanted for years; some North Bay counties would become part of North California; Stockton, Fresno and Bakersfield would be among Central California's largest cities; Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara would wind up in West California; and San Diego would anchor South California.

Each new state would determine its own type of government; dividing California's existing debt either would be negotiated among them or divided among them according to population. (Sorry, L.A.)

If California voters approve the measure, splitting the state still would require action by Congress. "But once it gets passed, I believe there will be some strong momentum," Draper said Monday, adding perhaps New York, Florida and Illinois might decide to split, too.

"I have worked on this for years," he said, adding he has taken time off from his global venture capital firm, Draper Fisher Jurvetson, to make a contribution to society -- and this is it. "This is something I just have to do, I just feel it."

Draper, who spent \$20 million on an unsuccessful school-voucher ballot measure in 2000, said he isn't interested in running for governor of Silicon Valley or any other office real or imagined -- a question raised by critics who say this proposed measure is little more than a ham-handed political publicity stunt.

California's beauty and strength is rooted in its size and diversity, said Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Pleasanton. "Six Californias is a foolhardy plan to tear that apart," Swalwell said.

Even getting on the ballot seems like a long shot, given that Draper said Monday he hopes to spend "as little as possible" to accomplish this. "I've got a whole bunch of people who are willing to raise money for this," he claimed, refusing to name any.

Draper has until July 18 to gather signatures from 807,615 registered voters in order to put the measure on the ballot. But in order to put it on this year's ballot, he'd basically have to submit signatures to county registrars by April 18 so they and the Secretary and State can certify the measure by mid-year; otherwise, it'll wait for 2016.

Corey Cook, a University of San Francisco political expert said he's "very skeptical" that this is going anywhere, particularly if voters view this through their own self-interest -- for example, Central California would probably have the highest poverty rate of any state in the nation while Silicon Valley probably would become the richest.

Dan Newman, a veteran Democratic campaign consultant, called the idea "silliness," though it could be a full-employment act for people like him. "The thought of California having a dozen U.S. Senate races and six gubernatorial campaigns does have a certain appeal to some of us," Newman said.

Josh Richman covers politics. Contact him at 510-208-6428. Follow him at [Twitter.com/josh_richman](https://twitter.com/josh_richman). Read the Political Blotter at IBAbuzz.com/politics.

EBMUD pursues second emergency water source in drought year

By Denis Cuff *Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times*

Posted:

Wednesday, February 26, 2014
ContraCostaTimes.com

OAKLAND -- The East Bay Municipal Utility District is lining up a second emergency water supply in the drought.

The water board agreed Tuesday to exercise an option to buy up to 20,000 acre feet of water from the Placer County Water Agency.

The East Bay district would spend up to \$8 million if it takes the full amount: \$1.5 million to buy the water and another \$6.5 million in pumping costs to pipe in the water from near Sacramento.

One acre-foot is enough water to cover one acre to a depth of one foot of water, or 326,000 gallons.

The East Bay district must pay a \$100,000 nonrefundable deposit, but still has time to decide whether to buy the extra water to ease shortages for its 1.3 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

On April 8, the water board is expected to forecast its annual water supply and decide whether to ration or stick with a plan to seek voluntary conservation. For now, customers are asked to cut back 10 percent.

"The pieces of the puzzle are coming together, and we expect in April to know how much water we will have in our reservoirs " said EBMUD spokeswoman Andrea Pook.

The district has until March 31 to buy the first 5,000 acre feet of water from Placer County. The Placer water agency is obliged to release large amounts of water from its reservoirs to help fish and wildlife in the lower American River providing that it can find someone to pick up and buy the water downstream.

EBMUD also has begun preparations to pipe in up to 66,500 acre feet of Sacramento River water it has a contract to buy in drought years from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

In a related action, the water board agreed Tuesday to pay \$900,000 over three years to WaterSmart Software Inc. to give regular reports to up to 100,000 customers on how their individual water use compares with imilar homes in their neighborhood.

A pilot test found that 10,000 EBMUD homes cut water consumption 5 percent when given the comparisons every two months.

Contact Denis Cuff at 925-943-8267 or dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com. Follow him at [Twitter.com/deniscuff](https://twitter.com/deniscuff)

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Lafayette Task Force Inches Forward

By Nick Marnell

The Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force, charged with seeking alternatives for the delivery of fire and emergency medical services to Lafayette residents, presented an update at the Feb. 10 City Council meeting. It also received a lecture from the president of the firefighters' union.

"Some of the things you've been saying are insulting to us," said Vince Wells, president of the United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County. "I have never heard a discussion at your meetings about putting fires out. All of the discussion has been on the finances." The task force meetings have focused mostly on the city's possible detachment from the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, the financial condition of the local fire districts and a proposed fire station 46 at the Lafayette-Orinda border, to be jointly owned and operated by ConFire and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

"There has been no intention to insult you or the firefighters," said Councilmember Mike Anderson. "That's not the issue. We're not getting what we're paying for, and the Board of Supervisors is not giving us what we want."

Task force co-chair Traci Reilly was just as direct. "Our residents demand that we fix a problem," she said. "We are trying to do what's best for Lafayette."

Wells, a ConFire captain, tried to downplay the city's frustration.

"I hear this same complaint in every district," he said. "Orinda thinks it's subsidizing Moraga. Brentwood thinks it's subsidizing East County. I'm almost ready to tell Brentwood to go ahead and leave. They'll find out how good they had it." He concluded with an admonition to the task force on its priorities. "Fire should not be minimized," he said.

The task force's report to the City Council outlined the bleak financial situation of both fire districts, but it noted that MOFD has taken steps to address its problems. It specified that a detachment from ConFire would be very difficult to accomplish without a negotiated agreement on the allocation of assets. Reilly explained that Lafayette is too small to stand on its own, so contracting for fire service is an option - with ConFire, MOFD and Cal Fire as potential candidates.

Slower response times in western Lafayette since the closure of ConFire station 16 were confirmed by task force co-chair Brandt Andersson, who complimented fire chief Jeff Carman on his willingness to at least consider new ideas for service delivery. Because of the deterioration of service, Andersson urged the City Council to not close the door on the idea of station 46, in spite of the current financial challenges.

Mayor Dan Tatzin summarized the direction from the City Council. "What level of fire and emergency medical service do our residents want, and what will it take to get us there?" he said. The task force was given the go-ahead to continue its investigation.

A glimmer of cautious optimism arose at the Feb. 20 task force meeting.

Andersson, who has been pushing Carman and MOFD chief Stephen Healy to move on station 46, requested an update. Healy said the district is awaiting results of environmental tests on the property, and after that, it will have architectural renderings of a new station to show the committee. Carman said he is putting together a presentation for the Board of Supervisors on the financing of the shared fire station. Commenting on the initial feedback to his proposal, Carman uttered a phrase not often heard the past two years in discussions of fire district finances.

"I'm encouraged by it," he said.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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Letters to the Editor

Editor

Regarding Gordon Nathan's letter of February 12.

For those unfamiliar with Mr. Nathan's history with MOFD, he was a Director of the District from its inception in 1997 through 2008. During that time period, the Board saw property tax revenue increase from \$9 million to \$16 million, growing at twice the rate of inflation, and yet managed to spend it all and put in place the current labor agreements that have caused the District to now be \$90 million in debt. Any criticism from him of the current board, attempting to clean up the financial mess caused by their predecessors, must be taken with a grain of salt.

As for his complaint that a claim by Orindan Keith Jacobsen that Orinda taxpayers are paying an inordinate portion of MOFD's expenses is "nonsense", is a baseless criticism. Mr. Nathan states Orinda taxpayers should pay more for service than Moraga taxpayers because they receive more service; and they do. This year Orinda taxpayers will pay about \$11.8 million in property taxes to MOFD while Moraga taxpayers pay about \$6.7. Mr. Nathan suggests that the total should be divided by the number of stations in Orinda (3) and Moraga (2). However, as a former director, he well knows that 90% of all expenses go to pay for the personnel who perform the services and not to maintain real estate. And with nine firefighters stationed in and serving Orinda (at a cost to taxpayers of \$1.3 million per firefighter), and eight firefighters stationed in and serving Moraga (at a cost to taxpayers of \$850,000 per firefighter), the inequity in funding is obvious.

There is a solution to this problem which Orinda residents were promised would never happen when they voted to form MOFD. That is for Moraga taxpayers to pay their fair share, an average of \$1.1 million per firefighter or about \$2 million more than they are currently paying. That could happen, as Mr. Jacobsen suggested, by increasing the rate on the Parcel Tax Moragans agreed to before MOFD was formed but which has never been fully assessed.

This extra money would not go back into the Orinda taxpayers' pockets but would provide services they are paying for. These services could include a paramedic station in Sleepy Hollow to alleviate the fact that 40% of all Orinda emergencies are not responded to within MOFD's response time guidelines; or vegetation control in large areas of Orinda that are considered very severe fire hazard zones due to excess vegetation as is now being done in Tilden Park; or repair some of the more than two dozen sub-standard fire hydrants which the fire flow parcel tax was supposed to address when it was voted for in 1997 but so far not a cent has been used for hydrants.

Orinda residents and their City Council should demand that their MOFD representatives act on their behalf and Moraga's MOFD representative should keep their half of the bargain.

Steve Cohn
Orinda

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MOFD Updates GIS Evacuation Maps

By *Cathy Dausman*



Uriel Garcia and Dennis Rein discuss evacuation routes in Orinda's Sleepy Hollow neighborhood. Their map is a print version of the GIS overlay system they are building. Photo Cathy Dausman as "a big picture kind of guy."

This information, and much more, can be layered into the GIS system, the way celluloid pages built the "visible man" in printed reference books. Each layer can be turned on or off as needed. To illustrate GIS use, Garcia showed how a simulated fire might grow from the Bear Creek trail - along the shore of Briones Reservoir - and progress south toward Orinda's Sleepy Hollow School. The location was picked because Sleepy Hollow neighborhood will soon become one of Contra Costa County's first Firewise (wildfire community preparedness, www.firewise.org) communities.

"GIS is a lifestyle program; it needs to be kept up," Rein said. MOFD started its evacuation route mapping back in 2006-07 under then fire marshal Tonya Hoover, who is now the California state fire marshal. She said the initial effort was tied into the California Fire Safe program (<http://www.cafiresafecouncil.org/>), with data layers intended for use by fire service responders.

MOFD was one of the first fire districts in Northern California to employ such technology, she said.

Hoover recalled planning "pretty lengthy" evacuation drills for Bollinger Canyon and Canyon. "Unfortunately, we didn't quite get there," she said, meaning the program was still in its infancy. (See related story on page D1.) Recent improvements now make GIS technology more accessible and certainly more affordable.

"High resolution ortho (aerial) photos used to cost thousands of dollars," Rein said. "Now many maps are available online, either free or inexpensively, through National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and U.S. Geological Survey websites."

Map analysis allows for better evacuation decisions to be made, with less risk of life for first responders, Rein said. GIS is "just a tool," he said; but Hoover called it a "wonderful" tool, and emphasized the need for fire service responders "to have all the best possible info."

This summer, updated 8 by 12 foot GIS maps will adorn each MOFD fire station. Garcia and Rein will also provide map books to every MOFD fire engine, and oversee GIS information updates for Saint Mary's College. Garcia will continue to work as a private contractor for MOFD through the current fiscal year; he is also negotiating with the Town of Moraga to perform similar updates on their GIS data. The project goal is to share information with "neighborhoods, emergency responders, cities and regional [entities]," Rein said.

"This area seems very good for sharing," Garcia said. And GIS data will become even more important as fire season approaches.

GIS is useful in operations, training and prevention applications, said Hoover. In a word, she calls it "amazing."

Usually residents want to get into their neighborhood, but there are times, and situations, where the goal is getting out. A flood, wildfire or hazardous material spill may make a neighborhood uninhabitable and evacuation imperative. This is why the Moraga-Orinda Fire District is utilizing computer technology to pre-plan local evacuation routes. The goal is to update the MOFD area GIS, or geographic information system, allowing first responders to identify safe exit routes and trouble shoot traffic control "choke points" - potential traffic jam locations - ahead of a real disaster, said Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein.

In 2013, Rein and MOFD intern Uriel Garcia worked to electronically note the location of the area's every fire hydrant, fire trail, and street. Garcia also uploaded parcel map information, the location of Central Sanitary (sewer) lines, East Bay Municipal Utility District water lines, local creeks, streams, and other hazards. Gas main information from PG&E is yet to be added.

The job was a good fit for Garcia, who describes himself

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Union Rallies Against MOFD Board

By Nick Marnell

A loud, standing-room-only crowd of disgruntled firefighters punctuated its message to the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors at the Feb. 19 district meeting: the rank and file are not happy with the direction of labor negotiations.

In January the board made its last, best and final offer to Local 1230 of the firefighters' union. The terms included a 9.5 percent pay cut for one year. The board declared an impasse; the union rejected the offer and has until Feb. 27 to request state-mandated fact finding.

MOFD union representative Mark DeWeese said that the board, not the firefighters, needs to be held accountable for its poor financial decisions. "We are the ones out in the street doing the work," he said. "If you don't support your workers, you are going to hurt your chances of having a successful organization."

"We don't deserve to be treated like this," said an emotional Tim Hill, MOFD engineer-paramedic.

Board president John Wyro assured the firefighters that nothing has been imposed and negotiations are ongoing. "Our goal is a sustainable fire district five years from now," he said. "We are available to talk at any time, about anything."

The most raucous ovation of the evening came after DeWeese blasted the terms of a self-administered pay cut requested by fire chief Stephen Healy.

In November, the board approved an employment contract for Healy at an annual salary of \$220,000, more than \$30,000 over the salary of his predecessor, Randall Bradley. At the meeting, Healy offered to amend his contract with a pay cut of 9.5 percent, the same reduction in salary offered to the firefighters.

"I appreciate your leadership on this," said director Fred Weil. "I take it to mean that you are prepared to do whatever else develops out of the negotiations or imposition with respect to the firefighters. On that basis I would vote to approve this." Healy said he understood that, at the will of the board, the term and the amount of the adjustment could change.

"The board is trying to market this agenda item as the same proposed pay cut they are threatening to impose on the firefighters," said DeWeese. "This move may deceive a casual member of the public, but the rank and file employees are able to put it in proper context." He explained that the 9.5 percent pay reduction that the board presented to the firefighters would lower their pay to 2 percent less than they made in 2006. The comparable base salary for Healy should be \$169,000, he said.

DeWeese did acknowledge appreciation for Healy's gesture. "But he is about \$30,000 short of putting (his salary reduction) on par with what he and the board are trying to force on the rest of us," he said.

The motion to amend Healy's contract passed 3-0; directors Alex Evans and Steve Anderson were absent.

Wyro later confirmed that the original negotiations with the chief were done in good faith. He said that one of the reasons for the chief's large pay increase was that Healy would be taking a hit in loss of overtime from his prior position as division chief. Wyro also insisted that the pay reduction amendment to Healy's contract was not a predetermined ploy.

"I can see how it might look that way, but that's definitely not the case," he said.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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Forum to look at water quality in "lower Delta"

By Paul Burgarino Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Monday, March 3, 2014
ContraCostaTimes.com

Antioch is called the Gateway to the Delta, but the East Contra Costa city is at "ground zero" as far as water quality is concerned.

As the state is in the midst of taking comments on environmental documents for Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to build two tunnels to move Sacramento River water south, a forum is set this week to bring concerned residents in the "Lower Delta" region up to speed on the plan.

The \$24.7 billion proposal -- which could cost at least twice that amount when factoring in financing and debt costs -- is widely opposed around the Delta communities, as critics say the tunnels would reduce freshwater flows, endanger fish and other habitat and put a sizable financial dent in local agriculture.

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.

Thursday's forum, hosted by Stockton-based Restore The Delta, is more focused on the western part of the Delta as many residents in Antioch don't realize the tunnels' potential effects, particularly to the city's water quality, said lifelong resident Mark DiMercurio.

"People have to realize this thing is moving forward. There's a need to educate as much as we can and give more exposure," said DiMercurio, a local real estate agent.

Antioch is unique compared with other Delta cities in that it has rights dating back to before 1914 that allow it to draw water from the San Joaquin River without the need for a state permit. Over the years, however, its once-fresh water has become saltier as state and federal agencies moved water from the region to Southern California.

Antioch's position is not for or against the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, but rather that it "is made whole" with any impacts to water reliability and quality, costs and recreational uses if and when the project is complete, said Public Works Director Ron Bernal.

"If they can't assure that, then we would be against it," he said.

A Feb. 6 letter from the city criticized the modeling work used for the plan, saying it overstated the benefits and understated the degradation of water quality. It also ignores questions of water reliability caused by drought, the letter said.

This year's drought has made the raw water Antioch pumps undrinkable because of higher levels of salinity, Bernal said. Antioch has had to use raw water exclusively from the Contra Costa Water District, and tap into its reverse fund to cover the additional cost, he said.

According to the plan's environmental documents, there would be an increase in the concentration of bromide in the Antioch area of about 51 percent, along with, salinity levels, chloride and mercury.

Early estimates indicate the cost to Antioch ratepayers to treat the saltier water could increase by

\$4 million each year.

Speakers at Thursday's forum include Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla of Stockton-based Restore the Delta, Contra Costa County Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho of Discovery Bay and state Assemblyman Jim Frazier, D-Oakley.

Frazier held a Feb. 12 hearing to look at economic oversight of the plan. Afterward, he proposed a bill that would require legislative approval before the construction of any Delta tunnel or water conveyance system.

"We need to make sure there is proper oversight of this project," Frazier said.

Like many state legislators in the Delta region, Frazier is opposed to the plan.

"It would be spending billions on a project that doesn't increase the state's water supply or give more reliability," he said.

Additionally, it would place a burden of debt on water contractors, meaning that could not invest in projects that promote self-reliance, Frazier said.

The deadline for comments on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan's environmental documents has been extended to June 13. 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).

IF YOU GO:

What: Forum on Bay Delta Conservation Plan and impacts on "Lower Delta" water quality

When: 6:30 to 8 p.m. Thursday

Where: Lone Tree Golf Course and Event Center, 4800 Golf Course Road

Information: To find out about the forum, email stina@restorethedelta.org. For more on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, visit www.baydeltaconservationplan.com.

Tri-Valley elected officials to hear results of consolidation study

By Jeremy Thomas jethomas@bayareanewsgroup.com Contra Costa Times

Posted:

Wednesday, March 4, 2014

[ContraCostaTimes.com](http://www.contracostatimes.com)

LIVERMORE -- Results of a study on possible consolidation of six of the Tri-Valley's water and sewer agencies into a single district will be presented for the first time to elected officials at a meeting in Livermore on Wednesday.

The first phase of the Tri-Valley Utility Coordination and Integration Study, completed in October, reviewed options for merging services in varying degrees for dealing with potable water, recycled water, wastewater and storm water. It identified 15 services the agencies could improve with more cooperation, and 10 other long-term "major integration" possibilities, recommending some for further analysis.

"This is the first time we're going to have these elected officials hear this information," said Dublin San Ramon Services District general manager Bert Michalczyk. "It's going to be interesting to see what the collective reaction is going to be to all this."

Livermore public works director Dan McIntyre and the study's consultants will present the report to the Utility Coordination Ad Hoc Committee, made of elected officials from Livermore, San Ramon, Dublin, Pleasanton, the Dublin San Ramon Services District (DSRSD) and the Zone 7 Water Agency. The six agencies serve about 277,000 residents with a total operating budget of about \$130 million.

Committee members will discuss options and provide input on what measures could be implemented soon, and others to be analyzed in a second phase of the study.

"We're part of the way through the process, so the bigger step is going to be going through the nuts and bolts," McIntyre said. "We'd like to get a sounding from the elected officials to see if this is reasonable ... Is it worthwhile?"

In the study, consultant Management Partners recommends looking at several more immediate improvements, such as merging fleet maintenance, water conservation programs, inventory control and management, lab services, sewer and storm drain inspection, and emergency response. Major options suggested for more study include consolidating stormwater management and recycled water services under one entity.

The report also describes seven governance models, ranging from inter-service contracts and public-private partnerships, to the creation of a brand new special district.

A second phase of the study would include cost analysis to determine savings, as well as a detailed examination of benefits and challenges to make it happen. The phase two study would take about one to two years to complete, and could cost between \$250,000 and \$350,000, a steering committee memo states.

However, McIntyre said utility officials are already hoping to iron out a contract implementing some of the reciprocal services, such as sharing of equipment, later this year. "We've been studying how to more effectively operate together over the past couple of years," McIntyre said. "We already

have a lot of existing collaboration, (but) there's a number of ideas we can look at."

The Alameda County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) recommended the Tri-Valley's utility agencies consider forming a consolidated municipal utility district in 2010, to streamline services and reduce costs. According to a staff report, thusfar, a total of 21 committee meetings have been held and more than \$200,000 has been committed to the effort.

The Wednesday meeting will be held at the Martinelli Event Center, 3585 Greenville Rd. in Livermore, beginning at 12:45 p.m.

Contact Jeremy Thomas at 925-847-2184. Follow him at [Twitter.com/jet_bang](https://twitter.com/jet_bang).

IF YOU GO:

The joint meeting begins at 12:45 p.m. Wednesday at the Martinelli Event Center, 3585 Greenville Rd., Livermore,

Embattled fire district nixes plans for June parcel tax

By Rowena Coetsee *Contra Costa Times* *Contra Costa Times*

Posted:

Tuesday, March 4, 2014
ContraCostaTimes.com

OAKLEY -- East Contra Costa Fire District directors have scrapped the idea of putting a parcel tax before voters in June, leaving the cash-strapped agency's future in limbo until at least this fall.

The board made the decision Monday in a 5-4 vote after only a tiny fraction of residents responded to an informal survey the district had conducted to gauge support for a proposed five-year, \$98 annual parcel tax.

East Contra Costa Fire recently mailed brochures to the 41,299 households in its service area explaining the need for additional money to keep its five remaining stations open and asking recipients to prioritize various aspects of its operations from response times to fighting grass fires.

As of Friday, 863 people had weighed in -- not quite 2 percent of those polled.

The consultant who is running the district's public education outreach considered the numbers "not bad" compared with those of typical direct-mail campaigns, but Director Greg Cooper called them "terrible" and Director Cheryl Morgan questioned whether a mailer had gone to every address.

Board members also had different takes on what the survey results meant. Ronald Johansen and Joe Young thought they were a sign that the district's efforts to communicate the gravity of its troubles are paying off, Young noting that the vast majority of those who responded indicated that they are willing to pay \$98 more per year to maintain the current level of fire service.

But Director Bob Kenny wasn't so sure, voicing his discouragement upon discovering during a visit to the post office how many people had tossed the mailers directly in the trash.

District consultant Charles Heath acknowledged that people tend to treat these kind of communications as junk mail, and also pointed out that the survey wasn't scientific like the one the firefighters' union hired a polling firm to conduct in January.

Those results revealed that only 54 percent of the voters likely to go to the polls in June were willing to pay more for fire services -- far short of the two-thirds approval the tax needs to pass.

The unpromising forecast had the board deeply divided. Some wanted to wait until November to hold an election, unwilling to spend the estimated \$100,000 it would cost to put the matter on the ballot, until they had spent more time and personal contact with voters in getting the word out.

East Contra Costa Fire has been saying for months that it will have to close two stations if it can't find another funding source before the federal grant that's been keeping it afloat runs out in November.

But others objected to a delay, saying that the parcel tax proposal would get lost amid all the other ballot measures competing for voters' attention during the gubernatorial election this fall.

Young conceded it will be difficult to get the tax passed regardless of when an election is held, but he urged his colleagues to move forward now.

Even if by some chance district residents in November agree to pay more, East Contra Costa Fire wouldn't see any of that revenue until the following December, he said.

Unless it could get a loan to bridge the funding gap for a year, the agency still would be forced to close at least one station, Young said.

"A November vote is not a vote for a five-station model," he said.

In the end, however, the contingent preferring to postpone action prevailed.

Director Stephen Smith said he wants to revisit the idea of consolidating with the Contra Costa County Fire District, and Young asked Chief Hugh Henderson to start planning for station closures so the district is prepared for that eventuality in November.

Contact Rowena Coetsee at 925-779-7141. Follow her at [Twitter.com/RowenaCoetsee](https://twitter.com/RowenaCoetsee).