

Bay Point: Pittsburg helping Ambrose park district renovate moribund swimming pool

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Agenda Item 13c

By Sam Richards srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com

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BAY POINT -- Eduardo Torres looks back with joy to a time when Ambrose Park was a place families wanted to go.

"I remember it for the pool, for the baseball leagues they had there; it was a good place to have fun, and it was nice," said Torres, who is demoralized by what the park, just south of the Highway 4-Bailey Road interchange, has become. While the center of the park remains usable, the physical neglect of recent years is palpable.

A quick look at the bathrooms, the long-empty pool, old tennis courts and the area beyond the kids' baseball diamond -- unrecognizable as such if you don't see the overgrown dugouts -- tells a story of years of deferred maintenance. Beyond the ball field, out of view of the main part of the park, is a homeless encampment.

"It's not somewhere we would want to take our family or friends," said Torres, a member of a new community group called West Pittsburg for Progress.

While there's little hope for the neglected baseball fields in the near term, the situation with the pool could change over the next year, as the city of Pittsburg teams with the Bay Point-based Ambrose Recreation and Park District for a \$2.3 million renovation of the park's moribund aquatic facilities.

Pittsburg is contributing \$600,000, Contra Costa County is pitching in almost \$480,000, and \$1.1 million is coming from Measure WW park bond money approved in 2008 by voters in Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

The park district contributed nearly \$100,000, but still uncertain is the source of the last \$300,000 needed for the project as a contingency for higher construction costs. Park district General Manager Doug Long said construction costs could be higher or lower.

"These are the kind of surprises we've been hit with in the past," he said.

The district, which owns and maintains nine parks and a community center, has been losing money for decades due to declining state revenue, lower local property tax income (which has been increasing since the Great Recession ended) and a meager commercial tax base, Long said. Deferred maintenance has been an issue at all of the parks.

The pool project dates from 2008, when the plan called for the swimming pool -- out of use since 2009 and now filled only with dirty rain water -- and an associated changing room/shower building to be demolished and replaced.

In early 2012, the city of Pittsburg and the park district agreed to a plan in which city staff would administer the pool design process, bidding and management of the construction, under the district's direction.

After the first two plans for the pool and related facilities were shelved when construction bids came in higher than expected, a third, smaller design was created. Now dubbed the Ambrose Aquatic Center Swimming Pool and Facilities Renovation Project, design is expected to begin this spring, with an opening

date in time for the start of the 2016 swim season.

As for the project's budget shortfall, Long said the district will likely seek grants and ask local industries, foundations and other civic supporters for money to get the project going.

Richard Russum, another member of West Pittsburg for Progress, used to play baseball on the diamond now filled with 3-foot-tall weeds, and as a kid often ran the long trail over a hill connecting the two ball fields. He's encouraged by the prospect of a swimming pool filled with summertime swimmers, but he's seen the earlier pool projects come and go with no results.

"It seems as though unless the public calls out these things, they don't get done," said Russum.

Torres, too, is skeptical the latest pool plan will go any further than the previous ones.

"Until I see a shovel hit the ground, I won't say I'm confident this will happen," he said.

Contact Sam Richards at 925-943-8241. Follow him at [Twitter.com/samrichardsWC](https://twitter.com/samrichardsWC).

Drought encourages do-it-yourself water recycling

By Denis Cuff dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 04/10/2015 06:22:07 AM PDT Updated: 47 min. ago



Leon Jung of Dublin hops off the tailgate of his truck after filling two 55 gallon barrels with recycled water at the Dublin San Ramon Services District on Monday, April 6, 2015 in Pleasanton, Calif. Jung uses the recycled water for his lawn, garden, and flowers. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

PLEASANTON -- Leon Jung figured he had to do something out of the ordinary to save his brown front lawn in a second year of water rationing.

So he turned to his local sewage plant.

He started trucking in reclaimed water a month ago from the plant that is the first in California to dispense free recycled effluent, or treated sewage, to do-it-yourselfers.

Yes, free water. You just have to be willing to haul it home in tanks, drums, barrels or jugs -- a rescue operation that seems a primitive throwback to the basics in a state with the most highly engineered water delivery systems in America.

Business, however, is booming at the household recycled water station in Pleasanton where water down the drain is converted to drought relief for parched lawns and shrubs.



Leon Jung sets up a pump to pull recycled water from a 55-gallon barrel to irrigate his lawn April 6, 2015, in Dublin. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

Sewer plants in Martinez and Livermore also have begun giving away reclaimed water to drive-in customers, and plants in several other California cities are considering it.

"This water is making a huge difference with my landscaping," said Jung, a Dublin resident. "The lawn got pretty brown and dried out last year during the cutbacks. I worry it would die if I didn't give it this extra help."

A retired software engineer, Jung took delight in designing his mobile irrigation system with two 55-gallon used food drums strapped to the back of his pickup. He fitted a plastic pipe that acts like a straw to suck up the water from the drums and an electric motor to send it shushing through a hand-held garden hose over his front lawn, ferns, camellia bush and other shrubs.

"I had fun coming up with this," he said as he steered a stream of treated sewage water on his lawn.

Jung is among the more than 610 residential customers who have registered to fill-em-up at the recycled water station operated by the Dublin San Ramon Services District at its sewer plant in Pleasanton near the crossroads of Interstates 680 and 580.

The popularity of the service has exploded in recent weeks. More than 50 people signed up in the past few days as the drought continues and temperatures climb.

Adding to the stakes, Gov. Jerry Brown last week called for mandatory water cutbacks statewide averaging 25 percent -- the amount Dublin, Livermore and Pleasanton already reduced last year.

"Our service is certainly riding a wave of popularity," said Dan Gallagher, the Dublin San Ramon operations manager. "I'm awed sometimes when I see so many people using our filling

station. It takes a lot of work to bring water home, and pump it on your grounds, and then keep doing it again and again."

The Dublin San Ramon district -- a combined water and sewer agency -- opened the recycled water station in July with three spigots and minimal expectations. Now the station has eight spigots with another eight to be added soon to keep up with spiraling demand. Anyone can take the water -- not just district residents -- and some people drive in from 30 miles away.

Officials said water shortages in the drought have helped many consumers get pass the yuck factor of using treated effluent.

The Dublin San Ramon, Livermore and Central Contra Costa Sanitary District sewer plants give the recycled water they distribute extra treatment with sand filters and disinfectant.

"Our tertiary treated recycled water is perfectly safe," said Sue Stephenson, a Dublin San Ramon spokeswoman.

There are limits, though.

Before they haul away their first load, consumers must sign a form pledging not to use the recycled water for drinking or swimming pools and not to put it in household water pipes.

"Some of our customers have become very creative in coming up with systems to get the water into hoses and drip systems," said Melody LaBella, acting water recycling manager at the Central San plant in Martinez.

Many California sewer plants send recycled water through purple pipes to ball fields, golf courses or street medians, or dispense it to commercial trucks watering down dust.

But the Dublin San Ramon Services District's sewer plant in Pleasanton last year become the first to offer the free water to ordinary homeowners, according to the California Association of Sanitation Agencies.

"CASA felt that this program might be a model for other agencies to emulate in future," said Bobbi Larson, executive director of the statewide association.

While hauling recycled water to homes is a drop in the bucket given the overall water reduction needs in California, it helps individual consumers meet rationing limits and reinforces a conservation ethic, advocates say.

The Dublin San Ramon plant dispensed 2.3 million gallons of recycled water to homeowners in 2014, and has given away more than 580,000 gallons in the first three months this year.

"If the drought ends, I suspect most of our customers will stop using our service," Gallagher said. "But I don't think we will close it because some people will still want to use it."

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

Three East Bay sewer plants let homeowners pick up and haul away reclaimed sewage effluent for irrigation.

Dublin San Ramon Services District plant in Pleasanton allows anyone with a vehicle and containers to haul home recycled water. For hours and information, visit <http://bit.ly/1a7ra0A>.

Central Contra Costa Sanitary District restricts recycled water giveaways to district residents. For hours and information, visit <http://bit.ly/1a7rTPx>.

City of Livermore also restricts water giveaways to city residents. For information, call 925-960-8100. Service is available from 6:30 to 8:30 a.m. and 2 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Our View: Trying to overturn LAFCO vote is wrong

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD -

04/11/2015 5:01 PM | Updated: 04/11/2015 9:42 PM

The building industry must be expecting a boom. Why else would it be so intent on lowering its cost of doing business in Stanislaus County?

The dust-up over how much should be paid when cities allow productive farmland to be paved over is a good indicator that builders are expecting to get busy. In one sense, that's good news. Stanislaus County has long welcomed new neighbors. Builders help make that possible.

But one of the things that makes life here attractive is that we still value the region's agriculture. We like the fact we can buy eggs fresh from the hens, cheese made on the farm, melons that grow sweet in the field and cherries, strawberries, tomatoes and apricots bursting with flavor. That's true only because there are still a lot of working farms (and farmers) nearby.

To help keep them here, we require homebuilders to preserve as much land as they take out of production.

Stanislaus County has a policy that requires cities to choose one of three ways to do that. One is to set urban growth limits, requiring a vote of the residents for any subsequent changes. Newman has done that, and voters in Modesto might require it of the city in November. Another is to require a builder to buy development rights on an equivalent amount of farmland and then guarantee the land will be farmed "in perpetuity."

The third, and now most controversial, is to pay a mitigation fee. It's easier for builders to just write a check, and most prefer to do that. The problem is the size of the check.

Builders like a flat fee – a low flat fee. Those trying to protect the area want the amount based on the value of the land being developed. If top-notch farmland is being paved over, then top-notch farmland somewhere else should be preserved.

The issue came before the county's Local Agency Formation Commission on March 25. The commission voted 3-2 to charge 40 percent of the sale price of the land. At current values, that works out to roughly \$7,300 per acre. Obviously, builders would prefer it to be much lower.

Almost a year ago, Stockton's John Beckman, CEO of the Building Industry Association of the Great Valley, sent a letter to Patterson's city manager recommending a fee of \$2,000 per acre – saying that would keep the city competitive with Tracy and Manteca. His suggestion was a bit off. According to LAFCO staff, actual mitigation fees in Manteca and Tracy are \$2,500 – or 25 percent more than he noted. And they haven't changed in 10 years.

Patterson, which has long been accommodating to builders, liked Beckman's number. But LAFCO has authority over this issue, not the city.

Two county supervisors, two council members from the county's nine city councils and one community member sit on the LAFCO board. Both supervisors – Jim DeMartini and Terry Withrow – are ag-friendly. So is Hughson Mayor Matt Beekman. The three voted to require cities to follow the formula for figuring in-lieu fees rather than allowing flat fees.

That Beekman would vote against their wishes so angered some of the mayors that they're trying to kick him off the commission then force another vote. They've already started the process.

That's shortsighted and wrong. Beekman has served on the state LAFCO and clearly understands that one of the commission's core missions is to preserve farmland – which the in-lieu formula does best. He wasn't just "voting his conscience," as some are saying, he was doing his job.

A woefully low in-lieu fee encourages destruction of farmland.

Denny Jackman, who is leading the Stamp Out Sprawl initiative in Modesto, called the \$2,000 fee suggested by the BIA "almost laughable." In 2012, the city of Patterson itself said the fee should range from \$3,500 to \$15,000.

One sure way to lose political support in this county is to be seen as a lackey for builders.

There's almost no other way to paint this ill-advised coup attempt. It isn't about protecting a city's prerogatives, it's about courting favor with deep-pocket builders.

A woefully low in-lieu fee encourages destruction of farmland.

Bethel Island preparing for \$3.5 million levee reconstruction project

By Rowena Coetsee rcoetsee@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 04/12/2015 12:00:00 AM PDT Updated: about 3 hours ago

BETHEL ISLAND -- The special district overseeing the maintenance of Bethel Island's levee is preparing to embark on a \$3.5 million reconstruction project targeting the most fragile portion of that protective barrier.

The Bethel Island Municipal Improvement District received word in late February it will be receiving a matching grant from the state Department of Water Resources to shore up a section of levee on the island's north side, where rocks above the water line have been collapsing into the river.

Known as Horseshoe Bend, the earthen berm takes a beating from the force of the currents in that area, said District Manager Jeff Butzlaff. If the levee gives away, massive amounts of debris could flow into the Delta.

"This is not just Bethel Island that would be affected; there's a regional impact on this whole part of the Delta and San Francisco Bay itself," Butzlaff said.

Andrea Lobato, who manages the state's Delta levees program, also stresses the need for sturdy barriers between land and water.

"Within the Delta, what is important is that the levee structure is sound, that we have levee integrity, that those structures can withstand high tides, wind, high flows, seismic (activity)," she said.

Butzlaff noted that the U-shaped configuration of Horseshoe Bend intensifies the water's erosive qualities by creating an underwater whirlpool action that for years has been scooping out sediment from the base of the barrier, thwarting efforts to keep the steep slope covered with rocks.

The project, which will take about three years to complete, is expected to get underway about this time next year, after the district clearly has defined how it will go about the work, Butzlaff said.

Fortifying the approximately 1-mile section of levee will involve trucking in more rocks and placing them at the base of its exterior. The Bethel Island district also will use sand to widen the top to 22 feet and to stabilize the levee's inner wall.

The project also will include restoring habitat by planting vegetation on both sides of the levee to provide shelter for birds and land animals, as well as for fish.

But with the prospect of tackling long-awaited safety improvements comes a potential hitch -- the terms of the grant require BIMID to contribute \$210,000 of its own money, and the district might not be able to do that unless voters approve a benefit assessment in June, Butzlaff said.

A majority of the island's approximately 1,800 property owners must agree to paying more.

"It will be very, very difficult for BIMID to come up with (the funds) without the assessment passing, but we will do our darnedest to not lose the grant," he said, noting that \$210,000 equates to about two-thirds of what the district receives in annual property tax revenue.

If voters nix the idea of a higher property tax bill, the district will have to decide whether to proceed with the project anyway at the risk of spending down its reserves to the point that it would be difficult to operate.

To do nothing would invite even worse trouble, Butzlaff said.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has identified Horseshoe Bend as one of the weakest sections of levee in the entire Delta, Butzlaff said, noting that this is a big reason that BIMID was among only four successful grant applicants of the 26 agencies vying for the funds.

"If the bend breaches, it would be extremely damaging," he said, noting that the island is the most populated of any in the region.

If part of the levee were to give way, all kinds of pollutants -- propane and septic tanks, transmission fluid, asbestos from older homes -- would flow into the Delta along with massive quantities of debris, he said.

As the date for mailing the ballots approaches, work crews are in the midst of a much less costly project designed to bring the levee up to minimum federal standards.

The combination of erosion and soil settling over time requires the district to have surveyors examine the levee every few years, measuring the height, width and slope of its walls to determine whether they have changed and by how much.

BIMID's contractor, which kicked off the work in March and is scheduled to finish by the end of this month, is focusing on a couple of sites on the island's unpopulated northern side and on targeting 41 residential properties that abut the levee along Taylor, Willow, West Willow and Harbor roads.

The work consists of adding sand and riprap according to the condition of each site, Butzlaff said.

A state grant is paying for most of this work as well; BIMID's contribution will amount to about \$50,000.

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

State probes mysterious Delta water loss

By Scott Smith, Associated Press

Updated: 04/12/2015 09:05:54 AM PDT

ContraCostaTimes.com

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FRESNO -- As California struggles with a devastating drought, huge amounts of water are mysteriously vanishing from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta -- and the prime suspects are farmers whose families have tilled fertile soil there for generations.

A state investigation was launched following complaints from two large agencies that supply water to arid farmland in the Central Valley and to millions of residents as far south as San Diego.

Delta farmers don't deny using as much water as they need. But they say they're not stealing it because their history of living at the water's edge gives them that right. Still, they have been asked to report how much water they're pumping and to prove their legal rights to it.



In this photo taken Friday March 27, 2015, low-flow water emitter sits on some of the dry, cracked ground of farmer Rudy Mussi's almond orchard in

At issue is California's century-old water rights system that has been based on self-reporting and little oversight, historically giving senior water rights holders the ability to use as much water as they need, even in drought. Gov. Jerry Brown has said that, if drought continues, this system built into California's legal framework will probably need to be examined.

Delta farmer Rudy Mussi says he has senior water rights, putting him in line ahead of those with lower ranking, or junior, water rights.

"If there's surplus water, hey, I don't mind sharing it," Mussi said. "I don't want anybody with junior water rights leapfrogging my senior water rights just because they have more money and more political clout."

The fight pitting farmer against farmer is playing out in the Delta, the hub of the state's water system. With no indication of the drought easing, heightened attention is being placed on dwindling water throughout the state, which produces nearly half of the fruits, nuts and vegetables grown in the U.S.

The Delta is fed by rivers of freshwater flowing down from the Sierra Nevada and northern mountain ranges. Located at sea level, it consists of large tracts of farmland separated by rivers that are subject to tidal ebbs and flows.

Most of the freshwater washes out to the Pacific Ocean through the San Francisco Bay. Some is pumped -- or diverted -- by Delta farmers to irrigate their crops, and some is sent south through canals to Central Valley farmers and to 25 million people statewide.

The drought, now in its fourth year, has put Delta water under close scrutiny. Twice last year state officials feared salty bay water was backing up into the Delta, threatening water quality. There was not enough fresh water to keep out saltwater.

In June, the state released water stored for farmers and communities from Lake Oroville to combat the saltwater intrusion.

Nancy Vogel, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Water Resources, said "thousands of acre-feet of water a day for a couple of weeks" were released into the Delta. An acre-foot is roughly enough water to supply a household of four for a year. The fact that the state had to resort to using so much from storage raised questions about where the water was going. That in turn prompted a joint letter by the Department of Water Resources and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation calling for an investigation into how much water Delta farmers are taking -- and whether the amount exceeds their rights to it.

Some 450 farmers who hold 1,061 water rights in the Delta and the Sacramento and San Joaquin river watersheds were told to report their water diversions, and Katherine Mrowka, state water board enforcement manager, said a vast majority responded.

State officials are sorting through the information that will help them determine whether any are exceeding their water rights and who should be subject to restrictions.

"In this drought period, water accounting is more important to ensure that the water is being used for its intended purpose," said U.S. Bureau of Reclamation spokesman Louis Moore.

Mussi, a second-generation Delta farmer whose family grows tomatoes, wheat, corn, grapes and almonds on 4,500 acres west of Stockton, said Central Valley farmers have long known that in dry years they would get little or no water from state and federal water projects and would need to rely heavily on groundwater.

"All of a sudden they're trying to turn their water into a permanent system and ours temporary," Mussi said. "It's just not going to work."

Shawn Coburn farms 1,500 acres along the San Joaquin River in Firebaugh about 100 miles south of the Delta. As a senior rights holder, he figures he will receive 45 percent or less of the water he expected from the federal water project. On another 1,500 acres where he is a junior water rights holder, he will receive no surface water for a second consecutive year.

"I don't like to pick on other farmers, even if it wasn't a drought year," said Coburn. "The only difference is I don't have a pipe in the Delta I can suck willy-nilly whenever I want."

Two East Bay water boards to vote on mandatory cutbacks in water use

By Denis Cuff dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 04/13/2015 01:21:07 PM PDT Updated: 90 min. ago

Two large East Bay water districts this week will consider becoming the first in the Bay Area to adopt state-ordered cuts in water use -- and provide notice of proposed drought rate increases.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District board on Tuesday will consider mandatory districtwide reductions of 20 percent below use in 2013. Currently, the district is asking its 1.3 million customers to voluntarily cut back 15 percent.

The Contra Costa Water District Board on Wednesday will consider mandatory reductions of 25 percent -- up sharply from its 15 percent voluntary conservation program.

The two elected water boards are responding to Gov. Jerry Brown's April 1 order for California urban water districts to cut back 25 percent on average. The exact reduction amount varies according to a district's per capita water use, the state water board has decided.

EBMUD and Contra Costa County officials this week also will consider a ban on watering lawns and plants more than twice a week.

"We managed this drought with minimal impact to customers of the local economy," said EBMUD General Manager Alexander Coate. "We can't know how dry next winter will be so we must save as much as we can starting today."

EBMUD officials on Tuesday will consider several drought measures.

One is to begin mailing customers public notices of a proposed 25 percent emergency drought surcharge. The surcharge -- plus a proposed 8 percent general rate increase -- would raise an average household bill from \$48.60 to \$60 per month for 246 gallons per day.

To enhance supplies, the board will consider authorizing taking up to 33,250 acre-feet -- or about a two-month supply -- of Sacramento River water from Freeport south of Sacramento.

To deter high use, the board will hold a hearing on proposed penalties for single-family customers who use more than 4.5 times the average household use.

The board also will hold a hearing on adopting its first fines for stealing water from the district, for example from hydrants.

Meanwhile, the neighboring Contra Costa Water District board meets Wednesday to consider adopting its reduction target. To reach it, the board has proposed temporary drought rates that

would increase the charge for each 748 gallons of treated water from \$3.45 to \$3.95 for 250,000 people in Concord, Pleasant Hill, Pacheco, Clyde, and parts of Walnut Creek.

The Contra Costa board intends to hold a public hearing on the rate increase 6:30 p.m. June 3.

CCWD spokeswoman Jennifer Allen said it will take work, but customers can cut use 25 percent by fixing leaks and cutting back on outdoor watering.

"If you haven't checked to see if your toilet is leaking, now is the time to do so," Allen said.

As an incentive, the proposed drought rates will result in a smaller bill for customers who cut use 25 percent or more, Allen said.

Limiting lawn watering to twice a week will help many households reach the 25 percent reduction target, she said.

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

Infobox1 The East Bay Municipal Utility Board meets 1:15 p.m. on Tuesday at 375 Eleventh St., Oakland.

The Contra Costa Water District Board meets 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday at 1331 Concord Ave.

EBMUD cracks down on water use

Updated: 04/15/2015 11:47:09 AM PDT

ContraCostaTimes.com

OAKLAND -- Facing their bleakest outlook since 1977, East Bay water officials on Tuesday declared a severe drought emergency and took dramatic steps to slow the flow at the tap.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District ordered customers to cut back water use by 20 percent and limit outdoor watering to twice a week -- and warned that higher bills are on the way.

Starting July 1, rates will go up 8 percent, and a special drought surcharge of up to 25 percent on household bills will kick in. EBMUD says the temporary surcharge is needed to pay for increased costs, including purchase and delivery of additional water from the Sacramento River, and to enforce the tougher restrictions.



Camanche Reservoir, April 2015. (East Bay Municipal Utilities District)

With the rate increase and surcharge, the average household using 246 gallons per day would see its bill go up by \$11.65 to \$60.25 per month.

Officials also approved steep penalties and fines against high water users and those who steal from hydrants, pipes and other sources.

"Many customers' lawns aren't going to be as green this year, and that's OK," district spokeswoman Abby Figueroa said.

"For the average person, it's about watering a lot less

outdoors this summer and shortening that already very short shower."

EBMUD is the first large Bay Area water district to adopt state-ordered water reductions since Gov. Jerry Brown's April 1 mandate to cut water use 25 percent across the state. The East Bay district was assigned a 20 percent target because it has a lower than average per capita use, but it -- along with other water agencies -- faces fines of up to \$10,000 a day for missing its target.

Until now, the district had been asking customers to voluntarily reduce use 15 percent, yet they have cut consumption only 6 percent this year so far.

Although the cutbacks ordered Tuesday are mandatory, EBMUD admits they will be achieved largely on an honor system -- the district will not monitor individual customers to see how much they've cut, and the penalties only apply to extremely heavy users. Still, because the district has a tiered rate system that charges frugal households the least and heavy users the most, officials argue there's a strong financial incentive to conserve.

With outdoor watering accounting for most households' largest discretionary use, district officials said it makes sense to set rates and rules to decrease lawn watering rather than set a per-gallon reduction target for households.

Bill Norton, an Alameda resident, told the board that charging more for water in a drought is an effective way to get people to cut use.

"Increasing rates is needed," he said.

Peter Rosen, a landscaper, said the district should require homeowners to install covers on swimming pools and spas to reduce evaporation. Next to lawn watering, pool water evaporation is the biggest source of water use in homes, he said.

The board decided to set penalties for households using more than 984 gallons per day, about four times more than the district average.

Director John Coleman of Walnut Creek argued the penalty trigger should be different in different parts of the district with varying average temperatures and lot sizes. Coleman, however, could not find other directors to support him.

Water thieves will get one warning, a \$1,000 fine for the next violation and \$2,000 for the second violation.

The board also took one significant action Tuesday to increase supplies. It agreed to pipe in 33,250 acre feet of Sacramento River to the East Bay -- the equivalent of a two-month supply of water.

East Bay hydrologists said the district reservoirs are projected to be only one-third full by Oct. 1, the lowest total in 38 years.

The district supplies drinking water to 1.3 million people in two counties in an area stretching from Pinole and Richmond to San Leandro in the south.

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

Contra Costa Water District sets 25 percent water conservation goal; rates to rise

Updated: 04/16/2015 06:37:10 AM PDT

ContraCostaTimes.com

CONCORD -- Responding to a big stick from the state, the Contra Costa Water District board unanimously adopted a conservation program Wednesday to get its 500,000 customers to reduce consumption by 25 percent.

Customers must limit outdoor watering to twice a week and can expect higher drought rates in the Central County in June as an incentive to cut back.

Those caught watering more than twice a week will be given one warning, fined \$250 for the second offense, \$500 for the third, and could be subject to water service cutoff.

"We want to give people an economic signal to save so the district as a whole can reach the 25 percent reduction target," said Jennifer Allen, district spokeswoman. "The state is in a serious drought, and we recognize we need to do our part to conserve."



Tenant James Monroe, left, gets a free residential water survey from Contra Costa Water District conservation technician Dennis Vigil as they stand in one

The drought rates would raise the average household's bill from \$67.61 to \$74.63 a month for 350 gallons a day.

The \$46.39 monthly bill for a frugal family using 200 gallons a day would not change, and would decline for customers who use 25 percent less water than 2013 levels.

Water guzzlers would be smacked with higher rates plus penalties for excessive use that kicks in at 1,000 gallons a day. A household using 1,200 gallons a day would see its monthly bill climb from \$215.56 to \$239.62, an increase of \$24.06.

Bette Boatmun, a water board member from Concord, said much of the district's new drought measures were a result of Gov. Jerry Brown's mandate this month for statewide water use reductions, but she expressed support for the overall program.

"It's not an individual problem. It's a state problem," she said.

Six customers addressed the board Wednesday and either asked for more details or expressed support for the district's conservation plan.

"I think it's a good start," said Don Mount, a Concord resident. "There is more that could be done about businesses using recycled water."

The board is scheduled to adopt the new rates June 3 unless a majority of the district's residents file protests against the increase.

If adopted, the higher rates will go into effect immediately for the district's 250,000 customers who get treated water in Concord, Clayton, Pacheco, Clyde, most of Pleasant Hill, part of Walnut Creek and a sliver of Martinez.

Similar drought rates and outdoor watering limits are expected to be considered soon by cities and water districts that buy CCWD water and provide it to another 250,000 people in Martinez, Bay Point, Pittsburg, Antioch and Oakley.

District officials say households have the biggest potential for saving by identifying leaks and reducing outdoor watering.

Just sticking to the twice-a-week limit on outdoor watering is expected to make a big difference, Allen said.

For the past year, CCWD has asked its customers to voluntarily save 15 percent.

The state can fine water districts that fall short \$10,000 per day.

The state water board assigned the 25 percent target to Contra Costa Water because of its per capita water use of 140 gallons a day last September.

The same 25 percent reduction was assigned to Antioch, Martinez and the Diablo Water District in Oakley. Pittsburg and the Golden State Water Company serving Bay Point were assigned a 20 percent reduction target because per capita water use there is less.

Contra Costa Water customers can get conservation information by visiting ccwater.com/conserve or calling 925-688-8044.

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

California drought: Delta smelt survey finds a single fish, heightening debate over water supply

By Lisa M. Krieger lkrieger@mercurynews.com

Updated: 04/16/2015 07:27:50 AM PDT

ContraCostaTimes.com

- [Your guide to living with California's drought - water conservation tips, drought monitor maps and more](#)

BYRON -- There's only one place left on Earth where imperiled Delta smelt are thriving, where their water remains cold and clean.

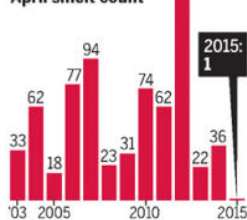
In the wild, the fish is on the brink of extinction. This month, in their April trawl survey, state Fish and Wildlife scientists caught only one of the pinky-sized, politicized fish with an outsized role in California's water wars, an alarming indication of just how few smelt are left. And the drought may inflict the final blow.

But here in this UC Davis-run hatchery, large tanks are filled with thousands of baby smelt -- where, for now, they'll stay, generation after generation -- because the Delta's warm, brackish and polluted water is too inhospitable.

Dwindling Delta smelt

Trawl surveys conducted each April show the plummeting number of adult Delta smelt discovered in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta since the drought began in 2012, despite pumping restrictions to help save the fish.

April smelt count



Source: California Department of Fish and Wildlife

BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

The fate of this fish -- wild or forever captive -- throws into question the future of one of the world's most contentious plumbing systems: the 700,000-acre Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the nexus of water moving from the state's north to south.

In the fourth year of a historic drought, biologists are issuing desperate pleas to devote Delta water for those few wild creatures that remain -- not just Delta smelt, but also longfin smelt, Sacramento splittail, Sacramento perch, river lamprey, green sturgeon, Central Valley steelhead trout and spring and winter runs of chinook salmon. It's not just about saving a single species, they say, but about saving a precious ecosystem.

But farmers say it's time to concede the fish is a lost cause -- and to supply more of the Delta's water to help humans.

Amid the crisis, there's this question: Do these cultured captive fish represent a new beginning in the wild, or an experiment in futility? The future of the Delta smelt -- and its impact on California's water supply -- is the latest installment of this newspaper's series "A State of Drought."

The fish itself is unremarkable -- short-lived, tiny and so translucent it's almost invisible. It lacks the charisma of a bald eagle, grizzly bear or bison. Until now, it's been durable, surviving millions of years through droughts far worse than this one. It was once the most abundant fish in the Delta.

This countdown toward extinction represents the failure of what was once the largest estuary between Patagonia and Alaska.

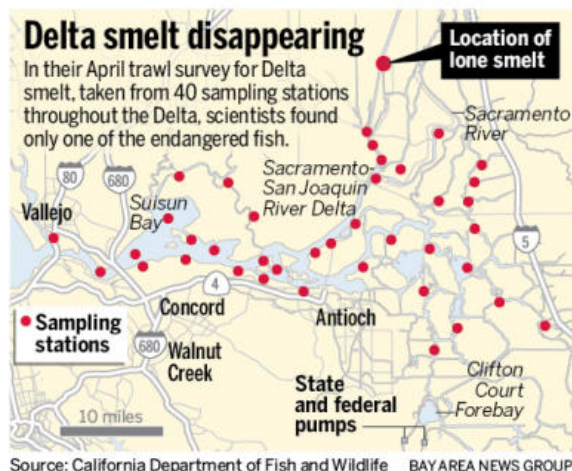
"The policy of the people of United States is not to let any species go extinct," said fish biologist Peter Moyle, associate director of the Center for Watershed Sciences at UC Davis.

"But the situation is pretty grim," he said. "And if it's unfavorable for the smelt, it's probably unfavorable for other species, as well."

The fish exerts such force on the Delta's waters that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regulates how and

when pumping can be done to protect it and other imperiled endangered species. Since the smelt is protected under the Endangered Species Act, a federal court order can -- and has -- reduced pumping to farmers and cities in Southern California. Yet this protection hasn't been enough for a species that lives in the pipeline of California's critical hydraulic system.

In March, when the California Department of Fish and Wildlife conducted one of its monthly spring trawl surveys for adult smelt, it found only four females and two males hidden in the grasses of a vast network of man-made islands and channels at the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers. April's survey found a single fish. While these surveys are merely a sampling of the population, they are a shadow of previous counts: In 2012, the March survey tallied 296 fish, while the April catch was 143. When smelt numbers get too low, it makes it harder for males and females to find each other, said UC Davis' Moyle. Another species, the longfin smelt, was also found in record-low numbers.



The impact of the drought is adding fury to hard and long-established arguments over the Delta smelt.

Efforts to stave off the fish's demise have been pointless and magnify the human suffering of the drought, said Chris Scheuring, attorney for the California Farm Bureau Federation.

"A lot of water has been thrown at the problem, to no apparent effect," he said. "Twenty million Californians depend on a water supply kept away from them by one small, little population of fish."

Good riddance, wrote Fresno-based Harry Cline of the Farm Press Blog. Turning off the pumps that serve the state and federal water projects wasted about 800,000 acre-feet of water in 2013 "based on the science of four buckets of minnows. That is enough water to produce crops on 200,000 acres or 10 million tons of tomatoes; 200 million boxes of lettuce; 20 million tons of grapes."

California needs to redouble its efforts to save those smelt that remain, counters conservation biologist Jon Rosenfield of the Bay Institute. Fish need far more freshwater inflows to oxygenate their water than they've been getting, as they also struggle against rising temperatures, salinity, pollution and predators, he said.

In early April, there was more bad news for Delta fish, with the State Water Resources Control Board's decision to reduce Sierra runoff to the estuary because of the drought, denying fish the pulse of cold, fresh water that helps them get through the year.

"This decision represents a major failure to protect the fish and wildlife that belong to all Californians," Rosenfield said. Failing to protect native species is asking for a wave of extinctions to commence, he said.

In desperation, UC Davis fish biologists have created what's widely regarded as the most sophisticated fish breeding programs in the nation. There's a smaller backup population at a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hatchery below Shasta Dam.

The goal is to save the Delta smelt's diverse gene pool before it is gone forever.

So the little fish has joined the ranks of other animals that owe their existence to captive-breeding efforts, including the Arabian oryx, the black-footed ferret, the red wolf, the Guam rail and the California condor. A UC Davis captive breeding program of the Amargosa vole, one of the most endangered mammals in North

America, has been so successful that this week more than two dozen voles were released back into the wild.

Here at the little-known Fish Conservation and Cultural Laboratory, this "refuge population" of fish is thriving and reproducing. Unlike the Delta outside, the water here is reliable and abundant. It's chilled to 52 to 60 degrees. It's disinfected and filtered of dangerous pollutants. Six times a day, the fish are fed a diet of live zooplankton, brine shrimp or special dry food, at a taxpayer cost of \$2.5 million a year.

The lab started with 160 wild smelt in 2006 and has bred 250 pairs every year, yielding distinct "families" of fish with thousands of offspring.

To ensure future genetic diversity, each fish is tagged and its fins are clipped, then sent to a UC Davis lab for DNA sequencing. The results guide matchmaking and identify the optimal crosses for reproduction.

"You always want to keep as much variation as you can. You don't know what genes it will require in the future," said former lab Director Joan Lindberg.

The lab then conducts tedious artificial insemination: Each female fish is squeezed, creating a pool of eggs around the size of a quarter. Then the sperm from the males is added. The fertilized eggs, safe in a small bowl of water, are incubated until they hatch 40 days later.

It's likely that these captive fish will be the only survivors of their species. Moyle advised the state's Delta Stewardship Council that wild smelt could be gone within the next two years.

Farmers and cities may then petition to have smelt "delisted" as an endangered species, contending that no protection is needed for a dead fish, said Scheuring, the farm bureau's attorney.

"If the Delta smelt go extinct, in the short run that could improve the pumping operations of water for humans," he said. "It will free the pumps to start pumping a fair amount more."

Environmentalists would, in turn, argue that other species also deserve protection, and would fight more pumping. There are at least seven strong candidates for Endangered Species Act protection, including sturgeon and some salmon. "They're queued up," Moyle said.

If smelt can't live in the wild, is there any point to the Davis lab?

Yes, biologists say, because humans have a moral obligation to save a species we ourselves exterminated.

"It is absolutely worth saving the historical legacy of this fish. If we don't have them, we will never have them again," said Casey Dillman, a fish scientist at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

The survivors in the UC Davis hatchery provide biologists a potent reason to keep fighting for Delta restoration. If reintroduced, the resurrected fish also might be protected by the Endangered Species Act -- and could assert the same legal claims as their wild ancestor.

But as long as the Delta stays hot and dry, even the most carefully cultured fish can't replace the dying wild populations, said lab Director Tien-Chieh Hung.

"We know if it doesn't get better, there will be no point to putting them back," he said. "All we can do is keep them -- and when ready, we can reintroduce them and hope they survive better."

Until then, the tiny fish, a symbol of both loss and hope, will continue to swim -- generation after generation, perhaps forever -- in safe captivity.

Contact Lisa M. Krieger at 650-492-4098. Follow her at [Twitter.com/Lisa M. Krieger](https://twitter.com/LisaM.Krieger).

THREATS TO DELTA SMELT

State and federal water export pumps
Summer and fall increases in salinity of Delta water
Summer and fall increases in water clarity
Effects from introduced species
Source: California Fish and Wildlife

San Pablo: County issues information on care alternatives in wake of pending hospital closure

Updated: 04/16/2015 07:05:57 AM PDT

ContraCostaTimes.com

SAN PABLO -- Contra Costa County this week began a multilingual information campaign to help patients in anticipation of the closing of Doctors Medical Center next week.

One flier in English and Spanish includes information on where people can get urgent care and phone access to a 24-hour advice nurse staffed by the county department of Health Services (call 1-877-661-6230, and select option 1).

Another flier is a list of health care providers, led by LifeLong Medical Care, which already operates on Vale Road across the street from the hospital and next week adds urgent care to its services. LifeLong also has three clinics in Richmond.

The information also is available on the Health Services Department website at cchealth.org/dmc/west-county-resources.php. Information in more languages will be added on the website; Vietnamese, Lao and Chinese are next, said department spokeswoman Kate Fowlie.

The information is being distributed to schools, city offices, community and faith organizations and hospitals, including at DMC's emergency room, and also is being shared on social media, Fowlie said. The county also has shared the list with 211.org, she said.

The county offers primary and other non-urgent care at the West County Health Center about a quarter-mile north of the hospital, at 13601 San Pablo Ave., and at the North Richmond Center for Health at 1501 Fred Jackson Way.

The county's list also includes seven other health care providers.

The target population for the information includes the 80-odd patients who walk into the Doctors Medical Center emergency room each day, mostly with issues that do not require emergency care. The emergency room has remained open for walk-in patients even after closing its doors to emergency ambulances in August. Until then, DMC had been the presumptive go-to place for people suffering a stroke or high-risk heart attacks.

The county said that predictions of increased mortality due to longer transport times if the emergency room were to close appear not to have come true.

"(High risk heart attack) patients in West County are now transported to other ... facilities in Oakland, Vallejo or Concord," said Fowlie. "Though transport times are slightly longer than they were to DMC, the facilities are able to prepare in advance with regard to readiness of the cardiac catheterization teams, which require a short time to prepare for action, and upon patient arrival those hospitals are able to rapidly address the patient's needs."

Contra Costa Emergency Medical Services Director Pat Frost said that Contra Costa, along with Alameda, Solano and Marin counties and the emergency medical system in general, have responded to the challenge.

"We're working as a region to take care of these specialized patients," Frost said.

But Sharon Drager, a vascular surgeon at DMC and a member of the hospital's governing body, disputes that the county has filled the void.

"Patients calling 911 are taken to all different hospitals across two and sometimes three or four counties," Drager said. "The county has touted the fact that 'No one has died' because of increased transport times, but what they really mean is that no one has died in an ambulance."

Statistics compiled by American Medical Response, Contra Costa's emergency ambulance service provider, show that since DMC stopped accepting emergency ambulances in August, West Contra Costa emergency patients were diverted primarily to Kaiser Richmond, Kaiser Vallejo and the Contra Costa County Regional Medical Center in Martinez.

In the last six months of 2013, Doctors received more than 2,600 emergency ambulance patients, AMR reported. The figure equates to between 14 and 15 a day.

The real test, some say, will come if there is a large-scale catastrophic event.

"I'm profoundly concerned what the aftermath of a closure of Doctors (Medical Center) could mean," Kaiser emergency room physician David Levinson said last month, speaking as a private individual. "I'm not sure the community at large is aware of how critical this would be.

"If there's an earthquake, or another natural disaster, where would people get care? Kaiser is the only other hospital in West Contra Costa, and it doesn't have the capacity to handle the caseload."

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

Doctors Medical Center's legacy of service remembered as closure nears

By [Tom Lochner tlochner@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:TomLochner@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Posted: 04/18/2015 03:58:45 PM PDT Updated: about 4 hours ago



Twilight view of the Doctors Medical Center from the emergency entrance in San Pablo, Calif., on Friday, April 17, 2015. The hospital's emergency room will be closed Tuesday, April 21 at 7:00 am after serving 60 years to the West Contra Costa County community. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group) (RAY CHAVEZ)

SAN PABLO -- Barring a miracle, the hospital that West Contra Costa residents voted to build in 1948 to serve the health care needs of the area's burgeoning post-World War II population will close its doors at 7 a.m. Tuesday. It will also close the books on six decades of history and memories for those who saved lives at Brookside Hospital -- later renamed Doctors Medical Center -- and brought new ones into the world.

"When you drove in to West County, the first thing you would see from San Pablo Avenue was this huge, seven-story, white building," said longtime West County resident and former hospital registered nurse Marcia Kalapus, remembering her initial impression of Brookside when she came to the East Bay from Southern California in 1959. "It was located in the perfect place, right off the freeway. And it couldn't be designed better."



A man wearing medical scrubs walks towards the Doctors Medical Center emergency entrance in San Pablo, Calif., on Friday, April 17, 2015. The hospital's emergency room will be closed Tuesday, April 21 at 7:00 am after serving 60 years to the West Contra Costa County community. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group) (RAY CHAVEZ)

In 1954, Brookside Hospital opened, so named for its proximity to Wildcat Creek. Though that hospital still towers above the local skyline, its financial framework has been crumbling for years, the victim of a radically changed health care environment that has claimed many stand-alone public hospitals. Even as it continued to be the go-to destination for heart attack and stroke victims in West County, DMC's privately insured patient base steadily dwindled, swallowed up by health care networks such as Kaiser Permanente, which operates the only other hospital in the region.

Tuesday's planned closing will mark the final blow after years of financial struggles, punctuated with last-minute, stopgap funding infusions, and a downsizing that saw the elimination of several units over the past two decades, among them the maternity, burn, wound and, more recently, lung and sleep centers. And in August, DMC stopped receiving emergency ambulances.

Contra Costa County Health Services is urging the 80-odd people who walk into the DMC emergency room each day to go across Vale Road to LifeLong Medical Care, a community health clinic that will start to offer urgent care Monday.



Marcia Kalapus, 79, a former nursing supervisor at Doctors Medical Center in Richmond, is photographed in her house in Pinole, Calif., on Friday, April 17, 2015. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group) (RAY CHAVEZ)

Nita Mitchell went to work at Brookside as a registered nurse in 1960 and worked at DMC until the late 1990s. Mitchell, 81, of Rodeo, says the closing of the hospital makes her fear for her community.

"I'm waiting for the next earthquake to come, the next accident at Chevron (in Richmond) or the one in Rodeo," she said, referring to the Chevron and Phillips66 oil refineries. "And you got the freeway (Interstate 80).

"Every morning when we get up, we listen to the radio and hear that traffic is backed up," Mitchell said. "How many babies have been born by the roadside because they couldn't get through all the freeways? Doctors Medical is down the road."

Jim McMillan, a Richmond resident since 1950 and a pharmacist at Brookside in its early days, said he joined Kaiser in January out of fear he would not have DMC to go to anymore. Sure enough, last week he got a "Dear patient" letter from the hospital.

"It has been our honor to care for you as a patient," it read in part, "and we are saddened that we will be unavailable to meet your inpatient, outpatient and emergency health care needs in the future."

"My worst fears came true," McMillan said. "That hospital was part of the vitality of this community."

"When we established a hospital district years ago, the promise was that we would have this facility for our lifetime."

Hospital officials blame DMC's \$18 million-a-year deficit largely on low reimbursement rates from government health programs -- about 80 percent of its patients are covered by Medicare or Medi-Cal. But some residents and medical professionals say DMC is at least in part a casualty of the unwillingness of government agencies and other medical providers to step in with the necessary funding to save it.

Kalapus, 79, of Pinole, was a young nurse at Pioneers Memorial Hospital in Brawley when she moved north with her husband, a discharged Navy corpsman starting his studies at UC Berkeley. She got a job as an obstetrics nurse at Richmond Hospital before coming aboard at Brookside in 1963 as evening nursing director. She was quality improvement director when she retired in 1997.

West County's population had some serious medical issues. The residents included shipyard workers who had been exposed to asbestos on the ships, Kalapus recalled. Many had cardiovascular diseases. Lung disease, asthma and diabetes also were prevalent.

"Bad diets, smoking, drinking -- there were about 50 bars along San Pablo Avenue."

Then, as today, there was the Chevron refinery.

"We used to get burn patients from Chevron and home fires," she said.

And with many discharged servicemen going to UC Berkeley on the GI Bill after the war, more babies were born, Kalapus added.

Around the mid-1960s, Brookside started adding new specialties: a neurosurgeon, gastroenterologists, orthopedists, cardiologists, pulmonologists and plastic surgeons. The entire seventh floor was dedicated to pediatric patients.

"It was a quality, top-of-the-line hospital; it wasn't just brick and mortar," Kalapus said. "It was one of the best hospitals in the Bay Area."

Mitchell, the former nurse, said the community is losing a unique and benevolent medical community.

"The doctors that I worked with, they never, ever thought, 'Am I going to get paid, or how much.' It was the old-fashioned way of thinking -- and a lot of doctors there still think that way."

On Wednesday, Kalapus went to the hospital one last time, to get her medical records now that she must look for a new hospital.

Afterward, she stopped in the hallway and closed her eyes for an impromptu moment of silence.

"I could hear the voices of patients talking, of doctors consulting, of people in pain, and families crying over the loss of a loved one," she said. "I could hear wheelchairs and gurneys rolling down the halls, and the intercom saying, 'Dr. So-and-so,' and a code number. The hustle and bustle.

"It was like the ghosts of the past. Then I opened my eyes, and it was quiet."

As she left the hospital for the last time, Kalapus turned around and delivered, aloud, a spontaneous eulogy, referring to it as "my darling lady."

"I want to thank you for taking care of all of these people who came through your doors. You opened your arms and said, 'We'll take care of you.'"

"It's gone now," she said. "There will never be another group of professional people, another entity, that cared so much for people in West County. El Cerrito to Crockett, we took care of everybody, regardless of race or ethnicity or income. (Doctors and nurses) were all good public servants, taking care of people.

"I had tears running down my cheek, because I knew it would be the last time that I'd be there."

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

San Pablo: Urgent care facility opens on eve of hospital shutdown

By Tom Lochner

tlochner@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 04/20/2015 11:57:19 AM PDT Updated: about 17 hours ago

SAN PABLO -- On the day before the closing of Doctors Medical Center, LifeLong Medical Care on Monday opened an urgent care facility across the street from the hospital.

Lifelong Medical Care, a nonprofit community health organization, already offers primary care as well as dental care, health education and health promotion at 2023 Vale Road. The newly opened urgent care facility in the same building is supposed to cater to many of the 80-odd patients a day who used to walk into the DMC emergency room, which is slated to close Tuesday morning.

San Pablo Mayor Kathy Chao Rothberg and City Manager Matt Rodriguez, Contra Costa County Health Services spokeswoman Kate Fowlie, and Joan Carpenter, an aide to county Supervisor John Gioia, hailed the arrival of the urgent care facility.

The facility will be open from noon to 8 p.m. seven days a week.

D.L. Poole, chief administrative officer for LifeLong, said the facility for the time being should be called "urgent care lite" because it still needs some permits from the city to expand. He said he expected those to be forthcoming, allowing the urgent care center to ratchet up to full strength soon.

The capacity of the facility to start is 48 patients a day for now.

However, Poole cautioned, "It's not going to be a replacement for the hospital."

Doctors Medical Center, which opened in 1954 as Brookside Hospital, is scheduled to close at 7 a.m. Tuesday after years of financial struggles and a series of one-time, stopgap funding measures that bought it limited time to continue operating.

The urgent care center initially will include five exam rooms, an observation room and an X-ray room, providing treatment for conditions requiring immediate medical attention such as sprains, broken bones, asthma, infections and the flu, LifeLong officials said.

Dr. Desmond Carson, a longtime emergency room physician at DMC, is the lead physician at LifeLong urgent care; he is one of several former DMC emergency physicians now at LifeLong.

LifeLong serves some 20,000 patients in West County annually, at the Vale Road location in San Pablo and three other sites in Richmond, said Executive Director Marty Lynch.

Founded in 1976 by the Berkeley Gray Panthers as a medical center for people over age 60 in Berkeley, LifeLong today serves about 47,000 individual patients of all ages at more than a dozen sites from East Oakland to West Contra Costa. Additionally, LifeLong has a small adult day health care center for disabled adults and elders in Marin County.

LifeLong's annual budget is \$55 million, consisting largely of Medi-Cal reimbursements, with the rest from Medicare, federal community health center funds, some philanthropic donations and occasional small amounts of funding from Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

Earlier this month, Lynch expressed concern over the closing of the six-decade-old hospital, and cautioned that his organization, even with the addition of an urgent care center, cannot fill the void.

"We can't pick up the role of the hospital; absolutely not," Lynch told this newspaper. "For the people who in the past walked into DMC's ER but didn't have a true emergency, for those people, I think it will help, but it won't take care of the true emergencies, the life-threatening ones."

to get help

Anyone without health insurance in Contra Costa County can call the county's free Advice Nurse Line (1-877-661-6230, option 1) for conditions that are not life threatening. The line is available to anyone 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The advice nurses can help people decide whether they need to seek emergency, urgent or next-day care, and where to get care. Anyone experiencing a life-threatening medical or psychiatric emergency should call 911 immediately.

Bay Point: Ambrose park district, general manager negotiating new contract

By [Sam Richards srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Posted: **04/21/2015** 09:30:19 PM PDT Updated: about 8 hours ago

BAY POINT -- The Ambrose Recreation & Park District board is renegotiating the contract of its general manager, who is threatening to resign unless district policies and his job duties are more clearly defined

Those talks are happening over the objections of one board member who questions the propriety of reworking a contract only 15 months into a three-year agreement.

Doug Long, the park district's general manager, said he wants the contract to include more specifics about what board members can and cannot tell him to do, in part so that he is not "micromanaged" by board members. He said he doesn't want undue board involvement with his day-to-day duties, and that such had been happening in recent months.

"We're just putting it together in black and white," said Long, who signed a three-year contract in December 2013 that calls for a salary of \$90,000 a year plus various benefits and perks.

Long said it has been board member Lloyd "Lee" Mason doing most of the micromanaging -- an assertion Mason strongly denied.

"I've never told (Long) how to do his job; I'm just getting information, and as a board member I'm entitled to that."

Long, whose district owns and maintains nine parks and Bay Point's community center, in February submitted a resignation letter, saying his last day on the job would be April 30.

Mae Cendaña-Torlakson, the board's chairwoman, said most of the board wants Long to stay, and has since moved to negotiate a new contract for Long, emphasizing that the main issue is giving him more autonomy, "more latitude in how he wants to do his job."

"We think he's doing a great job, and that was a decision of the board," said Cendaña-Torlakson, noting that "many in the community" have praised Long's work in 15 months as Ambrose's general manager.

Mason believes Long should honor his original contract and contends he has never gotten a formal explanation from the other board members, or from Long, as to why Long wants it revised.

"I feel it's such a breach of community trust" for Long to sign a three-year contract and seek a new deal so soon, Mason said. "To me, it's like blackmailing the district."

Editorial

Brown needs new strategy for drought

Contra Costa Times, 04/21/2015

California needs Gov. Jerry Brown's leadership to deal with the worst drought in state history.

The state has to reset its water priorities to match both current and worst case long-term needs. But Brown can't make that happen as long as he clings to his \$25 billion, twin-tunnel proposal to carry Delta water south.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan has deeply divided crucial players in high-stakes water politics, many of whom view it as another Northern California/ Southern California water war. And now that the Brown administration is poised to remove the "Conservation" part — the 50-year guarantee to restore Delta wetlands and habitat to keep the estuary healthy — all that's left is the massive tunnel project. It is dead in the murky, barely habitable water. So this is an opportunity. The drought not only justifies but requires a shift of strategy based on the deepening emergency. Other BDCP supporters, including the Santa Clara Valley Water District, should urge him in that direction. Let's not spend more money on a losing proposition. With the tunnels set aside, Brown could focus his political clout on developing and implementing cheaper, quicker, more efficient ways to conserve water — that's the main thing now — and offer long-term solutions to water-starved Central Valley farmers and urban Southern California areas.

Restoring the Delta ecosystem has to be at the core of California's water policy because so much of our fresh water comes from it, and the only way to sustain it is to get more water flowing through it, not less. California needs to conserve water for the long term. There's no shortage of ideas, just of leadership to make them happen.

Here are just a few things the governor could do through the state budget and his power of persuasion:

- Capture, clean and recycle more water. The state should build more and better wastewater recycling plants and raise the height of some reservoirs to capture what little rain we get.
- Make creative water bargains between urban and rural areas. Agriculture uses 80 percent of California's available water supply, but nearly 60 percent of farms don't have drip or other efficient irrigation that can produce most crops with 40 percent less water. Urban water districts could offer them subsidies and low-cost loans to install drip, and in return receive a portion of the water saved at a discounted rate
- Here's a simple one: Spend money already allocated to shore up the levees around the Delta.

The complexity of water politics dwarfs every other California issue. The specter of a very long drought cries out for a leader who can unite the players rather than driving them apart. Jerry Brown can be that leader. But he has to set aside the \$25 billion tunnels first.



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Better Year Ahead for ConFire

By Nick Marnell

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District chief Jeff Carman warned his advisory fire commission in February about the precarious situation the district was in. "We're at a tipping point," he said. Carman explained that the district did not have enough apparatus to keep all of the companies in service. Fire stations were starting to crumble; Lafayette's station 17 was closed for two weeks in late March while a main water line was repaired. Equipment was failing. Firefighters needed additional training. "For the number of fires our firefighters fight, they should not be doing it without proper equipment," said the chief, who confronted many of these district deficiencies head-on when he constructed the ConFire 2015-16 fiscal year budget.

Personifying his ailing district, Carman fought through cold symptoms as he presented the budget to the Board of Supervisors at its April 14 meeting. ConFire will pay \$1 million next year as part of a 10-year lease-purchase agreement for nine new fire engines, three ladder trucks and one rescue truck. The number of district full time employees increases to 336, to provide support in long neglected areas like training, telecommunications, information technology and facilities management. The budget includes the one-third installment of a 7.7 percent wage increase for firefighters and also the elimination of a portion of their 9 percent subvention of district pension costs. ConFire will operate 24 fire stations, including 24 companies and three squads, up from 23 stations and zero squads proposed in 2014-15.

The district will also meet its reserve requirement of 10 percent of general fund expenditures, and though it will require more than \$4 million of the fund balance to achieve that goal, it is far less than the \$9.5 million needed the previous year.

District revenue is budgeted to increase for the third straight year. Property tax revenue jumps from a projected \$95 million to more than \$101 million. ConFire will receive the second half of a two-year federal staffing grant of \$9.6 million. And the district expects to recognize \$1.7 million in first responder fees, charges billed to insurance companies for emergency medical treatment provided at the scene by firefighters.

Not included in the budget presentation were potential cost savings of the proposed station 46 joint venture with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, nor the potential revenue increases should ConFire assume control of the available Contra Costa County ambulance contract in 2016.

"In view of increasing revenues and a sustained economic recovery, this budget attempts to address some of (our) needs while still maintaining practical fiscal controls," Carman wrote in a letter to the advisory board. The county, in its budget document, acknowledged that ConFire has had to balance its fiscal difficulties "with maintaining a system that ensures the health and welfare of residents within the district."

The Board of Supervisors will approve ConFire's budget, along with the budgets of all of the county departments and certain special districts, at its May 12 meeting.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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San Pablo: Doctors Medical Center closes doors to patients

By [Tom Lochner tlochner@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:TomLochner@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Posted: 04/21/2015 09:29:23 AM PDT Updated: about 5 hours ago



Kim Johnson, left, a former patient access supervisor, and Patricia Tidwell, a patient care ambassador, hug outside of Doctors Medical Center as members of the hospital community gather on its last morning of operation in San Pablo, Calif. on Tuesday, April 21, 2015. (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area ...



Dr. Ronald Berman takes a few photos outside of Doctors Medical Center as members of the hospital community gather outside the facility on its last morning of operation in San Pablo, Calif. on Tuesday, April 21, 2015. (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group) (Kristopher Skinner)

SAN PABLO -- A bugler played Taps on a small portable stereo. Louis Armstrong sang "What a Wonderful World." Bruddah Iz followed with "Somewhere over the Rainbow."

More than 60 years of patient care at Doctors Medical Center came to a close early Tuesday morning, with an austere, tearful and informal goodbye gathering around a flagless flagpole outside the hospital's main entrance.

The seven-story, white building with turquoise trim will house a skeleton staff for a few months longer as officials of the West Contra Costa Healthcare District prepare it for sale. The public

hospital, which opened in 1954 as Brookside Hospital, closed its doors to patients at 7 a.m. Tuesday after years of financial struggles.

The 80-odd patients who used to walk in to the emergency room daily are being urged by Contra Costa County Health Services to go across the street to Lifelong Medical Care, a community health center that added an urgent care division Monday.

There were no speeches at Tuesday's closing. Employees hugged, and some cried, before going inside the hospital for a brief meal, prepared from a remaining batch of muffin mix by the dietary staff.

"They thought we should have a farewell for us," interim CEO Kathy White said.

White said Tuesday the hospital's license is set to expire in October and will be "in suspension" for an additional year, to October 2016. While someone could "theoretically" still offer to buy and operate the hospital, no realistic offer was on the table as of Tuesday, White said. Under a deal last month in which the city of San Pablo agreed to buy part of DMC's properties, the city acquired a right of first refusal to purchase the main part of the campus.

Later Tuesday morning, more than two dozen West County residents chastised Contra Costa County supervisors at their board meeting for failing to save DMC. Several left white carnations to mourn for the hospital and patients who could die being transported for emergency care to facilities farther away. Others said the closure was tantamount to institutional racism because the hospital served a mostly poor, minority section of the county. They urged the county to tax major polluters to help finance DMC.

"I can say without equivocation that people are going to die. It's a guarantee people are going to die because of the closure of DMC," said Eleanor Mahood, a registered nurse at the hospital.



The closed sign has been posted at Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo. The hospital officially closed at 7 a.m. on Tuesday. (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group)

Richmond Councilman Eduardo Martinez said West County's needs were being ignored by the supervisors.

"We need political will from you. You need to do this ... It's almost like we're the ugly stepsister," he said.

Supervisors did not comment about the closure but previously had said the county did not have the financial resources to sustain the hospital.

Until DMC closed its emergency room to emergency ambulances in August, it had been the go-to place for high-risk heart attacks and strokes in the area. Nowadays, those patients are taken to hospitals in Oakland, Vallejo or Central Contra Costa County, according to county Health Services spokeswoman Kate Fowlie.

The 20 percent or so of patients who used to come into the emergency room with actual emergencies "will be shuttled around," said Dr. Ronald Berman, an internist at DMC since 1971.

In the case of heart attack, "Let's say the stent doesn't go in time. Part of the heart will die," Berman said. "This could result in cardiomyopathy (weakened area of the heart) for the rest of their life. Time is of the essence."

The only other emergency room in West Contra Costa is at Kaiser Permanente in Richmond, which is not a designated hospital for high-risk heart attacks.

"Our (emergency department) has been significantly impacted due to DMC's closure. We're presently operating above capacity and are frequently saturated," Kaiser spokeswoman Yvette Radford said in a statement Tuesday.



Members of the Doctors Medical Center community gather outside the facility for a group photo on its last morning of operation in San Pablo, Calif. on Tuesday, April 21, 2015. (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group) (Kristopher Skinner)

At midafternoon Monday, the last day before DMC's closing, the ambience at the hospital was deceiving. One grounds worker was mowing the grass in front of the hospital's main entrance.

Another was operating a leafblower, and still another scooped leaves and other debris and placed them in a bin. Pink, yellow and crimson roses were in full bloom nearby.

One observer likened the cosmetic work to preparing a body for a funeral.

Many of the visitors Monday were there to pick up their medical records. Among them was Claudia Kelley, 69, of Pinole, who is following two of her doctors from DMC to John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek.

She gave birth to her daughter at DMC more than 40 years ago.

"The writing's on the wall: Time to close it. Hope for the best," Kelley said, adding: "It depends on what your emergency is going to be, and how long it takes you to get to another hospital."

Shortly after Tuesday's closing, Sheri Robinson of Vallejo was taking pictures of DMC's J.C. Robinson, M.D. Regional Cancer Center, named for her late stepfather. The previous day, she had taken home the bust of the longtime West Contra Costa physician, who died in 1994, that was displayed in the lobby.

Contemplating the closed cancer center, she said she found the experience humbling, and equated her stepfather's "down-to-earth" manner with the personality that defined DMC and its doctors, many of whom worked at the hospital for decades.

"Some of his patients who couldn't pay, he'd let them bake him a cake," she said.

Staff writer Matt Artz contributed to this story. Contact Tom Lochner at 510-262-2760. Follow him at [Twitter.com/tomlochner](https://twitter.com/tomlochner).

Richmond Confidential

Community members mourn the closure of Doctors Medical Center



Members of the California Nurses Association and the Richmond Progressive Alliance held a "funeral" for DMC prior to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors meeting on the morning of DMC's closure. (Photo by Bonnie Chan)

By [Gabriel J. Sanchez](#) Posted **April 22, 2015** 3:00 pm

Plywood with large red letters simply reading "DMC Closed" was affixed to the signs on the street that once welcomed patients to the largest public hospital on the western part of Contra Costa County. Members of the community gathered at the hospital in the early morning of April 21 to say goodbye, then made their way to the Board of Supervisors meeting at the county seat to inform the public about the threat of living in an area without a hospital.

At 7 am on Tuesday, April 21, Doctors Medical Center ended its 50 years of service to the public. At the medical facility that operated as a safety net hospital for a low-income community,

hospital staff had been fighting closure for several years while trying to fill a [\\$20 million budget gap](#). Cities like Richmond [as well as the state](#) provided millions in aid to help keep the hospital in operation, but could not keep up with its running deficit.

Nurses, doctors and other staffers said goodbye at the hospital by taking photos, hugging each other and crying as they played a recording of “Taps.” After they left the hospital, a caravan of community members traveled from San Pablo to the county civic building in Martinez, where three out of the five county Board of Supervisors members were conducting the weekly meeting. The protesters dressed in black, as though for a funeral procession, and filled the hallways holding signs saying “Invest in our public health system” and publicizing their hashtag, #Health4All.

The group — made up of patients, activists, medical staff and Richmond City Councilmember Eduardo Martinez — gathered in the lobby of the county building to hold a vigil for DMC. As the participants huddled together with white carnations in their hands, they spoke about loved ones who used the medical center, or departments in the hospital that will no longer be available to them.

Victoria Stewart, a longtime Richmond resident, was dressed in all black, including the black wrap around her head that was pinned together with a sparkling clip. Stewart had been undergoing cancer treatment at DMC and was lucky enough to complete her treatment before the center closed. She dedicated her speaking time at the vigil to say goodbye to the cancer center that helped provide her treatment as she fought the disease. “Today I say goodbye to the cancer center that was so important to me in my life and will no longer be there to help other people,” she said.

After the memorial, the mourners made their way into county chambers and took over the podium when it was time for public comment. According to the agenda, there was no vote scheduled related to the hospital, but the demonstrators and local leaders wanted to have their concerns heard one last time before history turns the page on the memory of the once-bustling medical facility.

Martinez, a community leader who was elected to the Richmond City Council in 2014, participated in the gathering and addressed the county board members while wearing a black hoodie and sunglasses. He said that there was a “lack of leadership and political will” to keep the hospital open and said that there is a division in the level of attention that the county pays to the people living on the western part of the county, as opposed to the more affluent communities in the east.

Martinez said that if the county continues to invest in jails and not medical facilities, the only way people in his community will receive medical care in the future is if they get arrested — and that’s why he had dressed the way he did for the protest. “It seems like your idea for healthcare in West County is to don a hoodie and some sunglasses, put your hands in your pockets and stroll down unincorporated Richmond so that you can be arrested and put in jail, so you can have healthcare,” he said.

Michael Parker, another longtime resident of Richmond, told the board that the reason DMC closed is “because it cared for too many poor people.” He accused the board of using a bad business model for the public hospital because they expected the facility to generate revenue. “I don’t believe you’ve ever asked the question of the fire department, or whether the sheriff’s department is a money-making operation,” Parker said. “They are paid because they are necessary services.”

As speakers approached the podium, they left their carnations piled on top of each other, like people do during the last moments of a funeral before a loved one’s casket is lowered into the ground. As they continued their public memorial, the pile of flowers grew larger and the tone of the speakers’ voice grew more intense.

Marie Walcek, a member of the California Nurses Association, addressed the board and with statistics and facts that highlighted the need for medical facilities in the industrial-rich West County. She reminded the public that after the Chevron refinery explosion, over 15,000 patients utilized the emergency and urgent care facilities at the hospital in less than a week. Walcek also pointed to what she felt were hypocritical inconsistencies in the discussions at county board meetings. “I’ve seen members of the Board of Supervisors in tears hearing about the critical services at some of our animal shelters,” she said. “I applaud your feelings for all creatures, and I hope to see the same level of intensity and passion hearing about the lives that have been lost in West County.”

As a part of the planning for DMC’s closure, a new urgent care center opened Monday across the street from the hospital to serve patients affected by the closure. LifeLong Medical Care, at 2023 Vale Road, will treat medical conditions that require immediate attention, but are not life-threatening. The nearest public hospital will now be Contra Costa Regional Medical Center, which is 20 miles away in Martinez.

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MOFD to Hold Public Workshop

By Nick Marnell

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District finance committee will conduct a public workshop this month to determine the investment mix for the district's other post-employment benefit trust account. In March, the district approved the pre-funding of its OPEB costs, which include the cost of retiree health benefits. It set up a trust account and hired Public Agency Retirement Services to manage the trust. MOFD will fund \$84,000 into the account this fiscal year.

"The investment company will make a recommendation on the investment mix," said committee chair Steve Anderson. But he stressed that the committee also wants public input on what the investment strategy should be. "Will we listen to what the public has to say? I answer that with an emphatic yes," he said. Various investment objectives will be up for discussion, ranging from conservative portfolios of more than 80 percent fixed income to a 72 percent equity capital appreciation portfolio.

The finance committee will evaluate the investment objective strategies that come out of the workshop and will present its recommendation to the full MOFD board.

District administrative services director Gloriann Sasser said that pre-funding OPEB costs strengthens the district's financial position by lowering its net OPEB liability, and using the earnings on investments will reduce future employer costs. MOFD carries both a \$17 million unfunded OPEB liability and an estimated \$40 million unfunded pension liability.

The finance committee scheduled the workshop for 5 p.m. Monday, April 27 in the Sarge Littlehale Community Room at Orinda City Hall, 22 Orinda Way, Orinda.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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San Pablo: Doctors Medical Center closure ends parcel tax, but another continues

By [Tom Lochner tlochner@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:Tom.Lochner@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Posted: 04/24/2015 04:11:02 PM PDT Updated: 3 days ago

SAN PABLO -- West Contra Costa no longer has a functioning community hospital, but residents will continue to pay a \$52-a-year special parcel tax, at least until 2027.

That is when the West Contra Costa Healthcare District, which owns Doctors Medical Center, expects to pay off the bonds it sold after voters approved Measure D in 2004. The bonds, technically Certificates of Participation, or COPS, are backed by future proceeds of the tax.

The preamble to the ballot language stated, in part, that "all revenue (would be) staying in our community for local emergency and health care services and facilities."

Doctors Medical Center closed Tuesday morning. According to some, it was the victim of low reimbursement rates amid the changing economics of the health care industry. Others blame the hospital's closing on the unwillingness of federal, state and county government agencies and other health care providers to do what it would have taken to keep it open.

The district's financial adviser says officials want an orderly closure of the hospital and to pay off its liabilities but cannot rule out bankruptcy under certain scenarios.

A second special parcel tax of \$47 a year, approved by voters in 2011, will lapse, however. The full text of Measure J specified that "in the event of permanent closure of Doctors Medical Center and its emergency room, this parcel tax will expire and the district will thereafter promptly cease imposition and collection of the tax."

Measure J, which will cease to be collected as of fiscal 2015-16, brought in about \$5.1 million annually, according to the district's financial adviser, Harold Emahiser. Measure D currently raises \$5.65 million a year. The health care district owes \$59 million on the bonds backed by Measure D proceeds, according to Emahiser.

The full text of Measure D makes reference to debt repayment, stating in part that the revenues raised by the tax "will only be used to defray operating expenses, capital improvement expenditures and debt repayment."

The health care district's share of the 1 percent ad valorem, or assessed-value-based, property taxes that owners pay to Contra Costa County each year will be retained by the county for seven years to pay off tax advances in recent years totaling about \$18 million. Imputed interest of about 6 percent a year brings the liability to just more than \$20 million.

The district's share of ad valorem taxes brings in about \$2.95 million a year, Emahiser said. Once the debt to the county is paid off, or in about seven years, the district will once again collect its share of ad valorem taxes, to be used in fulfillment of its mission to advance health care. And once the bond debt is paid off, in 2027, it can use the proceeds of Measure D for its mission as well. Emahiser cited other liabilities of the health care district:

- Unemployment expenses of about \$1.1 million, to be paid over the next six to nine months.
- Medical records retention, \$1.5 million, spread over seven years.
- Workers' compensation, \$6 million, to be substantially covered over the next year or two.
- Unfunded pension liabilities of about \$6.5 million.
- Vendor payments of about \$2 million, to be paid out over the next 60 days.
- Costs of about \$1 million to wind down operations.

Emahiser said the sale of the hospital's principal asset, the remaining 8-plus acres of its campus - - a 2.5-acre chunk, used by the adjacent Lytton Rancheria casino for parking under a 20-year easement, was recently sold to San Pablo -- could bring in \$10 million to \$20 million. One factor that could affect the sale price is whether the property can be marketed as a hospital or just as real estate. The hospital still has a license but may need several million dollars of fixes to be marketed as such, Emahiser said.

"If we can get \$15 million for the property, then we can honor our liabilities," Emahiser said, "but if we get substantially less, then bankruptcy would still be an option."

Staff writer Karina Ioffe contributed to this story. Contact Tom Lochner at 510-262-2760. Follow him at [Twitter.com/tomlochner](https://twitter.com/tomlochner).

The California Drought Crisis Is Everyone's Fault

Posted by : [PublicCEO](#) April 28, 2015 In [Local Government](#)

It's Easy to Place the Blame on L.A. and Agriculture, But the State's Water Deficit Goes Back to the 1950s

By Richard Goode.

My grandfather used to tell the story of traveling from Bakersfield to San Francisco by boat as a boy in about 1910. First up the Tulare Lake, then up the San Joaquin River, and through the Delta. In those days, water in California's San Joaquin Valley must have seemed inexhaustible.

Then, the lakes were drained and the rivers dammed; the valley floor was plowed and cities grew. Water was used at an ever-increasing rate. More and more wells were drilled and reservoirs built. There would be dry years and wet years. The water table dropped and wells went dry.

Last year, however, wells started going dry at an alarming rate. Residents in some areas have been without water for several months. The waiting list for a drilling rig to extend wells was up to a year. Today, up and down the San Joaquin Valley, signs along the freeway lament the water crisis. Everyone is ready to place blame, especially on the favorite whipping boys: Los Angeles and agriculture. But the truth is everyone is to blame and there are no easy solutions. California just doesn't have enough water to meet the demand. Hydrologists have been warning us since the 1970s that this was coming.

To understand the water crisis, you have to understand the structure of California and the San Joaquin Valley. The San Joaquin Valley is a broad basin that is bounded on the west by the Coast Range, which is mostly comprised of marine sediments, and on the east by the granitic Sierra Nevada. This basin is filled with layers of sediments that have washed down from the mountains over millions of years. These sediments are saturated with water and vary in thickness from about 2,500 feet in the north to about 9,000 feet in the south.

In the south, where there was no outlet for the runoff, the vast Tulare Lake was formed. In years when water was in abundance, water overflowed the divide and into the San Joaquin River, which in turn flowed into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and then through the San Francisco Bay into the Pacific Ocean.

Before irrigation began in earnest in the 1930s as affordable pumps became available, much of the valley's farming relied on the winter rains for the crops, winter wheat, and other grains. The ability to pump water from the aquifer beneath the valley is a major reason the valley became one of the world's richest agriculture producing regions. Immense water projects allow

California to store and transport surface water from the north, which generally receives more rain, to the dryer south. But even in wet years there is rarely enough surface water to meet the need. Groundwater is pumped to supply the difference between surface water availability and the demand for water.

California has been operating at a water deficit since at least the 1950s. Hydrologists estimate that on average 800,000 acre feet per year is pumped from the aquifer annually. Last year alone, closer to 2 million acre feet of water was pumped.

This tremendous withdrawal of groundwater has lowered the water table. As the water table drops, shallow wells that are normally sufficient to provide water go dry. The well must be drilled to a deeper level to provide access to the lowered water table.

The aquifer is usually recharged by runoff from the Sierra Nevada and, to a lesser extent, the Coast Range on the west. As the river water flowed into the valley, it soaked into the soil at the base of the mountains and made its way into the aquifer. The damming of the rivers, while providing water storage, has removed this major source of recharge. As water is removed from the ground and not recharged, the clay layers in the ground begin to compact. This causes subsidence of the surface. A few miles southwest of Mendota, the ground has subsided by more than 30 feet since the 1920s. Last summer's pumping has accelerated the change, producing a subsidence rate of half an inch a month. Nearly all of this subsidence is permanent, thus reducing the capacity of the aquifer (and, ironically, making flooding worse in wet years).

With reduced snow packs in the mountains during the winter, surface water is reduced and there is less water to share. This drying out is not just the present condition of the San Joaquin Valley; is the future of the American Southwest.

We have a bad habit of declaring a drought over when we receive several wet years in a row. But the damage of this drought is not reversible. Until we can recharge the groundwater at a rate equal to the withdrawal, California will be in a drought, no matter how much rain it receives. We may have already waited too long.

[Originally posted at Zocalo Public Square.](#)

East Contra Costa voters reject fire district's latest funding bid

By [Rowena Coetsee rcoetsee@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:rcoetsee@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Posted: 04/28/2015 06:15:19 AM PDT Updated: about 6 hours ago

BRENTWOOD -- Property owners in the East Contra Costa Fire District rejected a proposed benefit assessment Monday, a decision that will force the embattled agency to close two of its five remaining stations.

"I'm very disappointed in the decision the public has made," said board Director Joe Young following an announcement of the results.

Of the 38,529 ballots mailed to residential, commercial and government property owners last month, fewer than 25 percent -- 9,495 -- were returned.

Of those, 53.04 percent nixed the idea of an assessment and 46.96 percent voted for it.

The assessment, which would have generated an estimated \$4.2 million annually for five years, needed a simple majority to pass.

Young noted that the fallout will be severe: East Contra Costa Fire will be left with three stations to serve an approximately 249-square-mile area.

Currently it has fire houses in Oakley, Discovery Bay, Knightsen and two in Brentwood, although the district temporarily mothballed one of those in September pending the outcome of the election. Now Station 54 in Brentwood will remain closed and Station 94 in Knightsen soon will follow.

In addition, the loss of stations will require the district to eliminate four firefighters' positions by July 1, said Fire Chief Hugh Henderson following the meeting. The cuts will be the second time in three years that the district has laid off those on the front lines.

Expressing surprise at the results, Director Greg Cooper also acknowledged the added difficulty the district now will have protecting the public.

"Nine firefighters will be covering 100,000 people every day," he said, referring to the number who will be on duty among the three stations at any time.

Some of the board members emphasized the transparent way in which the district conducted the election: The ballots were counted in Oakley's city council chamber, where the public could drop in to watch the six-hour process.

Voicing his dismay, Director Stephen Smith blamed the election's outcome on what he considers to be a widespread mistrust of government.

Voters assume that all agencies waste taxpayers' money and consequently reject proposed taxes out of hand instead of taking the time to examine the facts, which he said would show that some like East Contra Costa Fire actually are working effectively.

"We got tarred ... with the brush of just being government and it's sad," Smith said.

As it is, the district now has given residents two chances to bolster its budget -- they also defeated a parcel tax in 2012 -- so it has no choice but to make the best with what it has left, he said, and then paused before adding, "God help us all."

Director Joel Bryant echoed Smith's sentiments, and pointed out that the defeat comes right at the start of fire season and in the middle of a severe drought.

Not only will crews take longer to respond to fires, however, but the public can expect to wait longer for medical help, he said.

East Contra Costa Fire has struggled financially for years, and the hard times have become even more difficult since 2010 when the district had an all-time high of eight stations.

That year it closed two, and three more shut down in 2012 following the failed parcel tax measure.

Although a multimillion federal grant that East Contra Costa Fire received a few weeks later enabled it to reopen two of those stations, that aid ended in November.

At its next regular board meeting on Monday, the fire board is expected to discuss the timeline for closing Knightsen's station as well as which types of calls firefighters now might have to forgo.

One example is sightings of smoke; engines now might respond only if it's confirmed there's an actual fire, Henderson explained after the meeting.

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

Big water buys to ease East Bay drought shortages

By Denis Cuff dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 04/27/2015 12:32:47 PM PDT Updated: about 4 hours ago

OAKLAND -- With one emergency water supply already flowing in, the East Bay's largest water district plans to buy three others to bolster its drought defenses.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District board on Tuesday will consider authorizing the purchase of up to 21,000 acre feet of water from three Northern California suppliers with water to spare. The purchase would amount to about a one-month to two-month supply for EBMUD's 1.3 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

The three purchases before the board Tuesday would cost about \$25 million to buy and deliver from a pumping plant on the Sacramento River at Freeport south of Sacramento.



Evan Miller from Sandis unfurls a type of natural cardboard that will nourish the soil while killing the grass as part of a more drought-friendly landscape at Lafayette Square Park in Oakland, Calif., on Earth Day Wednesday, April 22, 2015. (Laura A. Oda)

"These purchases will help us stretch our supplies," EBMUD spokeswoman Abby Figueroa said. "If we have another dry year (for winter of 2015-2016), we will be facing a dire supply situation."

EBMUD plans to buy 10,000 acre feet from the Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District in Willows, 5,000 acre feet from the Sycamore Mutual Water Co. in Colusa and 6,000 acre feet from Reclamation District 1004 in Colusa.

The three suppliers along the Upper Sacramento River are in a farming area with so-called senior water rights, a legal designation that makes them less vulnerable to water cuts than most places in California.

The Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District has water available to sell to the East Bay because its rice farmers are fallowing some fields this year, said Thad Bettner, the district's general manager.

The irrigation district will share a portion of the water sales revenues with farmers who idle their fields, freeing up the water to sell to urban residents, he said.

EBMUD officials say water purchases from outside and conservation from within are cornerstones of the district's strategy to weather this drought year. They hope to line up a total of some 65,000 acre feet of emergency water supplies this year for \$55.8 million to provide a four-month supply as drought insurance.

The cost of the extra water would be covered by proposed higher drought water rates that EBMUD directors will discuss in a public hearing at 1:15 p.m. June 9 at district headquarters in Oakland.

Meanwhile, one emergency water supply already has begun flowing into the district's San Pablo Reservoir in Orinda and Upper San Leandro Reservoir near Moraga.

The district plans this year to take up to 33,250 acre feet of Sacramento River water that it has a federal contract to use in dry years.

Even with several emergency supplies, EBMUD officials said they still need to get customers to meet a district goal to cut overall water use by 20 percent from 2013 levels.

On Tuesday, the water board also will hold a public hearing on a proposal to charge excess use penalties to residential customers who consume more than 984 gallons a day.

Tuesday's meeting begins at 1:15 p.m. at EBMUD headquarters, 375 11th St., Oakland.

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

#.

if you go What: East Bay Municipal Utility District board meeting

When: 1:15 p.m. Tuesday

Where: District headquarters, 375 11th St., Oakland

EBMUD adopts penalty fees for excess users

By [Denis Cuff dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Posted: 04/29/2015 07:01:29 AM PDT Updated: 20 min. ago

OAKLAND -- Shoring up its drought defenses, the East Bay's largest water agency approved penalties for excess water users Thursday and stiff fines for water thieves.

Effective July 1, the penalties for East Bay Municipal Utility District households using more than 984 gallons per day will have the biggest impact in hot areas with big yards such as Walnut Creek and Danville.

A household using 1,476 gallons a day would pay \$40 extra per month in penalties.

Homes will pay a penalty of \$2 per each unit (748 gallons) of use in excess of the 984-gallon unit.

The penalties were approved on a 6-1 vote. Water officials said the penalties will help EBMUD meet a districtwide goal of cutting water use 20 percent. The 984-gallon limit is about four times the use for the average district household.

John Coleman, the one board member opposed, said the penalties are unfair because they fail to recognize geographical differences in water use. People in hot Contra Costa areas with larger lots are more apt to be punished than residents of cool bayside communities with small yards and little landscaping, he said.

"I believe we need to take into account geography and square footage," said Coleman, who represents Central Contra Costa areas and the San Ramon Valley. "We are in a serious drought. The issue is how the penalty is applied."

To encourage saving, EBMUD also has proposed a 25 percent surcharge on water bills for its 1.3 million customers in Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

The district recently mailed out notices telling customers that EBMUD intends to adopt the surcharge unless more than 50 percent of customers protest in writing by 1:15 p.m. June 9 -- the time of a public hearing at district headquarters.

In a related move Tuesday, the board unanimously approved its first fines for water thieves who will be charged \$1,000 for the first offense, \$2,000 for the second and \$3,000 for the third.

In the past, the district has given verbal warnings to people who took water from fire hydrants or pipes without paying for it.

District officials said most of the water theft occurs in low-income areas where residents are turned off for lack of payment but then take it into their own hands to turn the service back on.

Some scofflaws even remove plugs that water district plumbers have installed in meters to block flows to offenders.

EBMUD officials said customers who remove plugs in meters will be assessed the theft penalties plus an additional \$2,667 fee to restore water service.

In another conservation move Tuesday, district officials said they are looking at offering cash rebates for customers to convert lawns to artificial turf.

The district is planning a pilot rebate program to pay 50 cents per square foot of lawn converted to artificial turf, up to a maximum of \$1,500.

For more than 20 years, the district has paid rebates to customers who convert lawn areas to drought-resistance landscaping.

Also, Tuesday, the EBMUD board unanimously authorized the purchase of up to 21,000 acre feet of water from three suppliers in an upper Sacramento River rice-growing area. The water will provide a one- to two-month supply for the district.

Total cost for the water is estimated at \$25 million, an amount to be paid for with the proposed EBMUD drought surcharge.

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

Pleasanton reconsiders planning for 1,300 new homes

By Denis Cuff dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 05/01/2015 05:43:23 PM PDT Updated: 4 days ago

PLEASANTON -- The drought may be drying up city leaders' interest in planning housing on Pleasanton's last major undeveloped parcel -- already a political hot potato in a slow growth city.

Facing residents' objections to considering up to 1,300 new homes amid water rationing, the City Council will consider May 19 whether to suspend planning on development options for 1,000 acres of former gravel quarry land in eastern Pleasanton.

On Dec. 16, the council voted 3-1 to continue preparing an environmental impact report on development options for the property north of Stanley Boulevard and along El Charro Road. Only Councilwoman Karla Brown voted to stop the planning.

But the drought didn't go away. Local residents have become more vocal in urging city leaders to halt planning of residential development in the area.

"The question is, does it make sense to continue building new homes if you don't have the water for them?" Mayor Jerry Thorne said. "I think we need to take another look at this and hear from the public whether we should put a hold on this."

Thorne and other council members agreed to hold a discussion May 19 on suspending the environmental assessment of options for the area in the so-called East Side Specific Plan area. A city advisory task force has helped to guide the process for two years.

Thorne said he is troubled the state continues to press cities to provide more low-income housing, yet has failed to build new reservoirs to store water for more residents.

"I think this drought is a lot worse than many people thought," he said, "and we just don't know when it will end."

Effective May 15, Pleasanton brings back stiff excess water use penalties for homes and businesses that fail to reduce use at least 25 percent below 2013 consumption.

Some Pleasanton residents opposed to housing in the old quarry area said they are pleased the council is considering a change in course.

"It makes no sense to jeopardize our water resources with 1,300 new homes," said Kelly Cousins, leader of the new Pleasanton Voters citizens group, which opposes development in the East Side area.

The group has helped stir public interest in the East Side area with a website, paper handouts and turnout at public meetings. About 100 people attended each of three recent meetings of the city task force studying development options.

Cousins said allowing 1,300 more homes would tax Pleasanton water supplies and schools and worsen traffic, air pollution and the town's charm.

She said she doesn't want the city to halt the planning temporarily, and then start it up again when the drought ends.

"This is a long-term issue," Cousins said, "and it won't go away when we get some rain."

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

Contra Costa Times editorial: It can take a long time to overcome voters distrust

Contra Costa Times editorial

Posted: 05/03/2015 09:00:00 AM PDT

When local government leaders irresponsibly seek excessive taxes, they lose the trust of the electorate and have a hard time getting it back.

That seems to be the lesson for all elected officials from last week's rejection of a special property assessment to help the East Contra Costa Fire District, which includes Brentwood, Oakley, Byron and Discovery Bay.

The vote means the district, which once operated eight fire stations and is now at four, must trim to three. Only nine people, plus a battalion chief, will be on duty to protect 105,000 residents spread over 249 square miles.

The rejected tax measure was reasonable, less than \$113 a year for most houses. We endorsed it, with reservations. But it was, by legal necessity, complicated. Moreover, voters apparently distrusted the district because of its overreach in 2012.

Residents' tax-aversion is understandable. Many live in newer communities, so they don't enjoy as large Proposition 13 tax breaks as those who have owned homes for decades.

Moreover, most newer developments were strapped with extra fees as a condition of construction. Homeowners pay extra for items such as landscaping, street lighting, park maintenance and "community facilities" fees. Those cost hundreds or thousands of dollars annually.

Against that backdrop, the fire district in 2012 proposed a \$197-per-parcel annual tax that would have escalated to \$257 over 10 years. That plan, which we opposed, demonstrated no fiscal discipline and failed to address soaring retirement costs. The tax required approval from two-thirds of voters but received just 44 percent support.

District directors and firefighters regrouped. Before proposing the latest measure, employees agreed to make larger contributions to their pensions, although the district still faces huge retirement benefit costs.

For this measure, district directors trimmed the proposed levy and sought to avoid the two-thirds voter-approval threshold. They switched the proposal from a simple tax on each parcel to an assessment district, in which fees are levied based on extra services each parcel supposedly receives and only property owners cast ballots. Votes are weighted in proportion to the fees on each property and majority approval is required.

That complexity probably turned off some voters. But the proposed levy was lower than the 2012 plan for most houses, the duration of five years was shorter, and the amount would not have increased during that time.

Approval by only 47 percent of the weighted vote last week suggests the district hasn't regained property owners' trust after the irresponsible 2012 plan.

The moral to public officials: Begin with a fiscally responsible plan the first time. Distrust takes a long time to wear off.

The Modesto Bee

Community Columns

May 4, 2015

Denny Jackman: Angry mayors must learn they represent us

By Denny Jackman

It is easy to see, and thus understand, why folks are becoming more interested in urban development. The incredibly rich soils that surround most of our urban areas in Stanislaus County provide vivid distinction between areas of asphalt and food-growing land.

Much of this land has been nurtured by families generationally tied to many of us urbanites within our cities.

Since 1989, Modesto voters have been “advising” city councils on urban expansion. Only three times have councils gone against those votes, making Modesto one of the most densely populated cities in the Central Valley. That density is a good thing, considering Stanislaus County is one of the top 10 food producers in the United States. Agriculture is the gift that keeps on giving.

In 2008, while the irrational exuberance of sub-prime lending and liar loans nearly collapsed our financial markets and left many Valley homeowners “upside down” in value, voters in Stanislaus County took a stand. Nearly 70 percent said yes to farmland protection by directing housing into cities under county ballot Measure E.

Yet, some did not interpret that farmland protection had a role for our cities.

In January 2014, the Modesto City Council voted not to protect farmland, choosing to expand their urban plan onto prime ag land! What?

What is going on with piecemeal county projects outside of our city spheres of influence? Why not stay in areas already approved for urbanization by our Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO)?

And what is going on with most of the mayors within Stanislaus County?

In March, Hughson Mayor Matt Beekman joined Stanislaus County Supervisors Terry Withrow and Jim DeMartini to add guidelines to the fees developers must pay when farmland is lost to

residential development. Six of those mayors now want Beekman replaced on the commission because he did not “represent” their wishes.

Really? Shouldn't our mayors be representing *us*? How often, how loud must the public say “protect our best farmland” before our elected officials get the message?

Perhaps county and city representatives will hear the next public ballot message when, once again, the citizens vote in November on an urban limit line in Modesto that clearly protects our best farmland! Will county supervisors respect that line? We hope so.

Jackman is a charter member of the Farmland Working Group and a former Modesto City Council member.

The Modesto Bee

Letters to the Editor

May 4, 2015

Peter Sugia: Beekman did the right thing, regardless of mayors' objections

The uproar over Matt Beekman's efforts to amend agricultural preservation policy through LAFCO comes as little surprise. It exposes the tension that will always exist between preservation, profits and short-term planning.

Responsible management of farmland is inconvenient to housing developers and those they influence in city government because it limits unrestrained growth. This amendment, approved by a majority of LAFCO commissioners on March 25, provides succinct guidelines toward funding farmland preservation those who choose not to purchase easements directly.

LAFCO is ethically and legally bound to develop and implement policies consistent with this objective. The objections of six mayors now calling for Beekman's resignation from the LAFCO board apparently represent a misunderstanding as to his role. His duty as commissioner is to uphold the legal guidelines and advocate for prudent land use policies. He is not, nor should he feel obliged to agree with the six mayors who appointed him though they stand opposed to his amendment. He is responsible to the citizens of Stanislaus County.

Kudos to Beekman for his hard work and perseverance in crafting the (amended) Agricultural Preservation Policy. Free enterprise created the sprawl we call Los Angeles. I appreciate LAFCO's efforts in promoting more responsible growth.

Peter Sugia, Hughson

Published **May 6th, 2015**

Why Are the Station 46 Negotiations Taking So Long?

By *Nick Marnell*

Site of proposed fire station 46 at 1035 Lorinda Lane in Lafayette Photo A. ?Scheck

Some mergers take just months to complete, like the recent formation of the Kraft Heinz Company between Kraft Foods and ketchup maker H.J. Heinz. Some take longer. The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District board of directors in June authorized Fire Chief Jeff Carman to negotiate a contract with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District to build and operate fire station 46, a joint venture to replace MOFD's aging station 43 in north Orinda and ConFire's closed station 16 in western Lafayette. An agreement has yet to be reached.

Frustration with the station 46 negotiations boiled over at the April 20 Lafayette Emergency Services Task Force meeting. "Here we sit, after 18 months, with no fire station," said Jim Fajardo, task force member. "The taxes continue to be paid, our marbles are all in this basket. At what point do we go back to the initial suggestions, and not hold our breath waiting for this?"

"Our residents are asking us what is going on," said co-chair Traci Reilly, a Lafayette city council member. The city, unhappy with the closure of station 16, created the task force in 2013 to investigate alternative delivery of its fire and emergency medical service, and the initial options discussed included secession from ConFire and merging with MOFD. "All of us around the table are getting impatient," said task force member Peter Clark. "It doesn't seem to be that complex of a problem."

"From my perspective, it is complex," said Carman. "It's a 40-year, \$200 million contract, and you can't just pull one down from the shelf." He explained that in substance, both districts are in agreement with the deal, but language changes need to be resolved, because each lawyer sometimes writes language that is not agreeable to the other side. Carman used the example of purchasing new equipment.

What will the equipment be able to do, and who decides? He also pointed out that, since ConFire has agreed to pay half of the station 46 operating costs, what happens if MOFD's costs rise more than ConFire's? "We are trying to leave very little to the imagination," said the chief. "This isn't a competition. We just want to make sure our agencies and our customers are protected well into the future."

But Clark continued to push back. "It's a mathematical fact that every month this is delayed saves ConFire \$100,000," he said, referring to the estimated \$2 million annual operating cost of the station, which is to be split evenly between districts. "It doesn't save me anything," said Carman. "If I could get the station on the street tomorrow morning I've got the money to do it and I'm ready to go." Supervisor Candace Andersen confirmed that it wasn't about the money. "Absolutely not," she said. "My greatest priority as ConFire director is to get a fire station built in western Lafayette."

Also scrutinized was MOFD's performance. "There is significant opposition to this, from Orinda's point of view," said Orinda resident Richard Nelson. The grass roots Committee to Save Our Honey Hill Fire Station circulated a petition against building the new station, claiming that station 46 will increase response times in north Orinda.

"A total of 100 citizens have signed that petition," said MOFD director Steve Anderson. "Out of 7,000 voters, tell me, is that significant?" He said that the petition drive has not been a factor in holding up the merger; Carman confirmed that the drive has not stalled the ConFire efforts either.

MOFD Chief Stephen Healy acknowledged that the Honey Hill opposition has added to the amount of time he's had to spend on the agreement. "They've asked for a sophisticated analysis, which made for a lot more work than I thought," he said. "But I'm glad we did it." Healy hired a company to update a report on response times in the north Orinda area, and the report will be available to the public at upcoming station 46 workshops.

Though the firefighters' union initially balked at the staffing model proposed for station 46 Vince Wells, Local 1230 president, said that the union is not holding up the deal. "It's not us," he said. "We're anxiously awaiting to look at the contract ourselves. I don't know what the districts have put on paper."

Neither MOFD lead counsel John Bakker nor county counsel Sharon Anderson responded to a request seeking reasons for the delay in the negotiation. "I wouldn't really say it's delayed," said MOFD board president Alex Evans, whose division includes station 43. "I would say it's complicated and these things take a long time."

"If lawyers want to get something done they can work night and day to get it done," said Clark. Task force member Jim Cunha agreed. "Sending stuff back and forth can take an eternity," he said. "Did you ever think about everyone sitting down in the same room?" Carman said that in the next couple of weeks the lawyers, board representatives and chiefs plan to do that very thing.

Once a tentative agreement is negotiated, MOFD plans to conduct public meetings in Moraga and Orinda to explain the financial and operational details of the joint venture. When asked by the task force to confirm a date that a tentative agreement might be reached, Carman indicated June or July.

"This contract will outlast my tenure at ConFire and I don't want someone to inherit my mistakes," said Carman. "So while I recognize that this is moving slower than I'd hoped, I am confident that we are covering all our bases.

"It's moving at the pace it needs to move."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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Moraga Town Center Developer Threatens MOFD

By Nick Marnell

Newport Beach-based City Ventures, LLC, developer of the proposed Moraga Town Center Homes project, warned the Moraga-Orinda Fire District that it will pursue "any and all relief that may be available" against the district if it continues to oppose the development, which is to be built on property adjacent to the district's training facility at fire station 41. In an April 8 letter from the company's law firm to the MOFD board and Fire Chief Stephen Healy, City Ventures accused the district of trying to intentionally devalue the property by raising illegitimate concerns about the project for the purpose of acquiring the property under eminent domain; the company said it viewed the district's actions as constituting an inverse condemnation of the property. "If the district wants to condemn the property then they should just go ahead and do it," said Charity Wagner, City Ventures' director of development.

"That is not the intent of MOFD," said Alex Evans, district board president.

MOFD has long been concerned about the compatibility of residential units built adjacent to its training facility. In a 2008 letter from district counsel regarding the Moraga Center Specific Plan, MOFD alerted the town that "The station's operation and noise may not be compatible with the proposed residential use."

The district again informed the town in 2014 of its concerns regarding the close proximity of the Town Center residential units to its training facility. MOFD cited noise during necessary night drills; water from fire hoses traveling across the property line; and privacy issues, since six of the proposed units have rear windows that face the training facility. The district also asked that a deed restriction be recorded on each home in the project, outlining and serving notice of the training facility activity and fire station operations.

In a letter to Moraga city manager Jill Keimach, district counsel said that MOFD has no intention of either acquiring any portion of the Town Center property or devaluing the property for purposes of acquiring it. At its April 29 meeting the MOFD board prepared a letter to the Moraga town council, stressing that the district remains opposed to the Town Center project because of the incompatibility with its training facility.

Director Fred Weil said that he favored structuring the letter around existing general plan policy.

"It's helpful to us, and it's going to be helpful to the council, to be able to look at a vision of the general plan and say, 'Does this project meet this policy statement?'" said Weil. "Grant the appeal if it doesn't meet it and go back and try again." Three Moraga residents, including one-time MOFD director Dick Olsen, filed an appeal against the Town Center project because, among other reasons, it did not conform to the Moraga General Plan. Their appeal, continued twice from Jan. 28, is to be heard May 13.

The board voted 4-0 in favor of presenting the letter to the town council at the May 13 council meeting, with Evans abstaining. "I don't completely agree with the board's position on this," he said. "But I'm not going to vote no and try to undermine it." He would not elaborate later on what specifically he didn't agree with. "I'm not going to get into that," said Evans, nor would he comment on why he opposed the board's action in general.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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East Contra Costa Fire Protection District closes 2 fire stations

By Rowena Coetsee rcoetsee@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: 05/05/2015 08:47:07 AM PDT Updated: about 19 hours ago

OAKLEY -- With hopes for a last-minute reprieve now dashed, the embattled East Contra Costa Fire Protection District has decided to close two stations permanently.

The nine-member board of directors voted unanimously Monday to shutter Knightsen's firehouse and make the temporary closure of another in Brentwood permanent, leaving three stations to cover a 249-square-mile area.

The closures will take effect Monday.

The action follows the April 27 defeat of a proposed benefit assessment that, although a temporary fix, would have generated an estimated \$4.2 million annually for five years.

People jammed Oakley's City Council chamber at the outset of the meeting, which was still going more than 3½ hours later as the board weighed the effect that the closures will have on response times. Speakers voiced dismay over the possible increase in losses of life and property, as well as skyrocketing home insurance premiums. Others predicted that home values would plummet and businesses that might have considered moving to the area now will reconsider.

The remaining stations -- in Oakley, Discovery Bay and a second in Brentwood -- will stay open not only because they're the most populous communities and consequently generate the most calls, but because serving them enables the district to cover the largest possible area, Chief Hugh Henderson said after the meeting.

In addition, their proximity to each other will make it possible for engines to respond to calls in other areas in roughly the same amount of time, he said.

But dropping to three stations will mean a loss of four positions, bringing the number of firefighters on the payroll to 27.

The district still will be able to put three men on an engine -- the count determines how safely and efficiently a crew works -- but now it only will be sending three engines to a structure fire.

To preserve its practice of dispatching five engines on a first response to a burning building, East Contra Costa Fire now will have to rely on outside agencies to provide the additional two -- or more if some of its engines already are tied up on another call.

And that means it will take longer for backup to arrive because those crews will be coming from outside the district.

In an effort to compensate for the cuts, the agency will be deciding which nonemergency calls it no longer will respond to, including requests for help with water leaks and carbon monoxide alarms, as well as investigating reports of smoke or odors. Medical cases that aren't life-threatening also might fall by the wayside.

A number of residents were worried about their insurance costs going up, which could happen if the ISO rating for their area increases.

ISO is an organization that evaluates fire risks on behalf of insurance companies, assessing communities on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the best score.

Most of the district is rated 4 or 9, depending on property owners' proximity to fire hydrants and a station, Henderson said.

However, there are rural areas that are already a 10 -- Morgan Territory, parts of Byron and the northern end of Bethel Island, he said.

And closing stations will leave more people farther from help, which could earn their area the worst rating as well, he said.

Some in the audience suggested that the district talk with the county and the cities it serves to see if they'd be willing to help it pay for another station.

Henderson also mentioned the need to look into consolidating the district with Contra Costa County Fire District at some point.

Discovery Bay resident Lisa McBride was among several who asked the board to consider holding yet another election. She repeatedly apologized for failing to cast her ballot, saying it got lost in the shuffle of mail.

"Give us another chance. I guarantee you (that) you will raise the money," she said. "I guarantee they wouldn't vote it down this time."

Of the 38,529 ballots mailed to property owners, only 9,495 -- fewer than 25 percent -- were returned. Voters also rejected a parcel tax measure in 2012.

Oakley Mayor Doug Hardcastle blamed the election's outcome on people's failure to grasp the personal risks they face with only three fire stations, believing that they're immune from disaster.

"I think we've been let down by the electorate," he said.

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