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Agenda Item 12c

(Part 1)

For California's Drought Towns, the Next Challenge Is Growth

As development booms in the San Joaquin Valley, poor communities see both opportunity and heartbreak.

LAURA BLISS |  @mslaurabliss | Oct 19, 2015 |  3 Comments



A sign is posted near a cluster of vacant homes in Sacramento County, just north of California's San Joaquin Valley. (REUTERS/Robert Galbraith)

Editor's note: This story is the last in a three-part series on the future of the San Joaquin Valley's unincorporated communities. Read parts [one](#) and [two](#).

FRESNO, Calif.—In the 600-person, unincorporated community of Lanare, travel options are limited. One bus heads 30 miles to Fresno in the morning,

then comes back in the evening. It takes roughly two hours each way.

So Isabel Solorio, a 50-year-old housekeeper and community activist, relies on her old Chevy Suburban to get to doctors' appointments, clients' homes, and stores. Though tomatoes, asparagus, garlic, and grapes all grow within miles of Lanare, there's nowhere to buy truly affordable produce short of Fresno. She goes there weekly, and buys everything she can.

"Paying for so much all at once is very expensive," she says. On the floor of her gleaming kitchen in Lanare sit small pallets of melons and tomatoes. "Gas to the big store is also expensive." Between her needs and her husband's commute to the fields, Solorio estimates they spend more than \$200 per week on fuel for hundreds of miles traveled.

In the sprawling, disconnected San Joaquin Valley, home to four million residents, a lot of people get around like Solorio does. Emissions from transportation, mostly from trucks, are what primarily make the region's air quality among the worst in the nation, despite some improvements in the last decade. As [many as 21 percent of adults have asthma here](#)—Solorio included—[and 24 percent of children](#). There's a disparate impact at play: The zip codes with the highest rate of respiratory risk have poor and predominantly Hispanic populations. And lately, the drought has made air even more unbreathable.

Air pollution is another byproduct of the San Joaquin Valley's legacy of short-sighted, inequitable land-use planning. Other outcomes, as we've seen in [previous stories](#), include dry wells in the midst of drought, mismanaged, contaminated water systems, and septic tanks that leach into the aquifer. We've seen how [poor, unincorporated communities of color](#) are disproportionately affected by these gaps in basic services, and are often disenfranchised by local governance structures from [finding lasting solutions](#).

Yet more people are coming to the San Joaquin Valley. Projected to gain three million residents by 2050, the region is growing faster than nearly anywhere else in the country. [According to forecasts](#), most new migrants will be Hispanic and have low incomes. Some will be professionals priced out of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Still others will be wealthier retirees, moving in from the

coasts. The [advent of high-speed rail](#) will bring in even more new faces from across the demographic spectrum.

Will the valley's growth take shape as it has historically has—spread out and uneven? Or will it be something more sustainable and just? And, crucially, where will the water come from?

In the heart of the valley, Fresno County offers some indications.

A new era in planning

In 2008, California became first in the nation to pass a law linking climate change with the way we build towns and cities. The landmark Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act, [SB 375](#), required regions to start planning with a goal to reduce greenhouse gases, mainly by reducing trips in cars. This is meant to be achieved with effective new transit options, denser housing through infill and mixed-use development, and updated, "greener" infrastructure to support it all.

"Smart growth," as this planning framework is often called, discourages sprawling into undeveloped, isolated places, and encourages redeveloping what already exists. In the agricultural mecca of the San Joaquin Valley, it also means conserving prime farmland.

“The entire state needs to transform the way we plan and invest. If you leave them out, rural communities will never be able to contribute.”

— PHOEBE SEATON



In growing Fresno County, some towns are taking steps to contribute to the state’s goals. In particular, the city of Fresno, the largest in the San Joaquin Valley, has been encouraging infill, revamping its inner core, and developing green spaces. (James Fallows has detailed Fresno’s renaissance at [The Atlantic](#).) In the town of Reedley, 25 miles southeast of Fresno, a planned [mixed-use housing development](#) will run on solar power and send its treated wastewater back into the aquifer. Hanford, a town of 54,000, has created a successful vanpool program used mainly by low-income workers, one of the first of its kind in the valley.

But in a county that’s strapped for cash and searching for a broader tax base, “smart growth” is getting lost in the economics and politics of general growth. Subdivisions just keep getting developed. And some of these new towns may wind up with problems that poor, unincorporated communities have lived with for years.

Sprawl dies hard

On an August evening around sunset, the light on Millerton Lake is beautiful, if

a little ominous. Bathtub rings etched into the soft brown foothills around the lake glow pink. In California's fourth year of drought, the lake—really an artificial reservoir—is at [35 percent capacity](#).

Standing on the massive boat ramp that slopes to the water's edge, I can see the frames of houses perched on a crest. There's lots of new development in this area, 35 minutes northeast of the city of Fresno. Tucked further back in the hills, for example, lie the beginnings of a master-planned, unincorporated community called Millerton New Town.

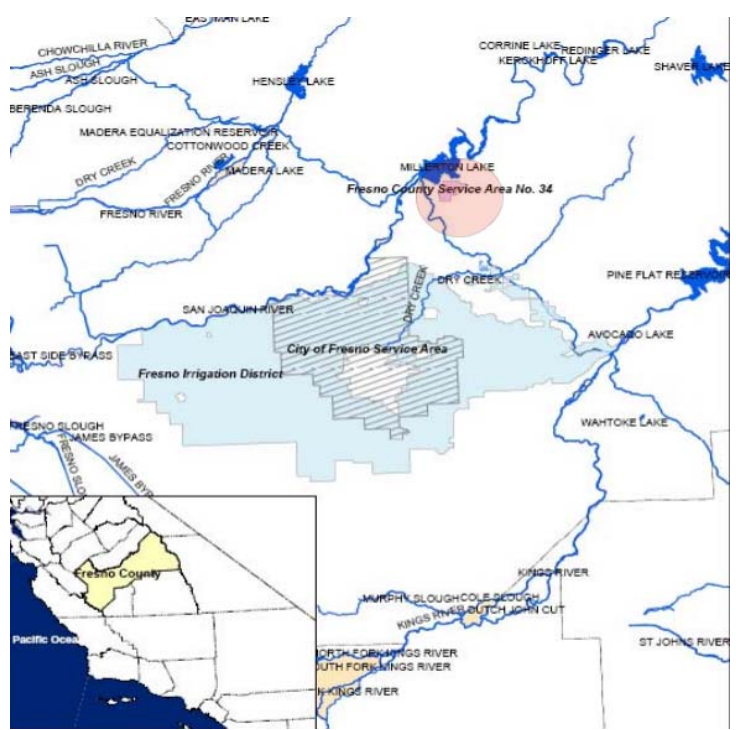
At least 4,500 homes are slated for construction, enough to house [10,000 to 12,000 people, according to planners](#). Some houses are already occupied or ready to be, and run from around \$300,000 to \$900,000 based on a Zillow search. Blueprints for a pharmacy school, projected to draw [2,000 students and nearly 300 faculty and staff](#), are also taking shape. Roughly half of the student body will be housed on the school's campus.

Millerton New Town had been a 2,000-acre twinkle in Fresno County's general plan as far back as the mid-1980s. Officials tell me it never progressed because of concerns about [service reliability](#). But in recent years, new development across the Madera County border got Fresno County eyeing Millerton more aggressively. In 2011, the state granted permission for the community to source water from Millerton Lake. That same year, developers broke ground.

"We thought, before our residents jump into new houses in Madera and we lose the tax base, let's at least provide them an opportunity to stay here," says Henry Perea, one of five Fresno County supervisors.

Millerton New Town may very well provide short-term revenues to the county, but from long-term environmental and financial standpoints, it risks unsustainability, officials and experts told me. It may also perpetuate challenges of water access and affordability that have plagued the region for so long.

"Millerton New Town appears to spit in the face of SB 375," says Mike Dozier, executive director of both Fresno State University's Office of Economic and Community Development and the California Partnership for the San Joaquin



Fresno County Service Area 34, circled in pink, covers Millerton New Town. (U.S. Bureau of Reclamation)

Valley, a non-profit promoting regional growth. “Those students are not all going to be living on campus. People that work there aren’t going to want to live there. They will be commuting from Fresno.”

Right now, there is only one access road that serves Millerton New Town. It’s the same one that boaters and jet-skiers take to get to the lake’s recreation area, and the same one revelers take to roll the dice at a nearby tribal casino. That road will likely need widening to serve more vehicles going up and down the hill.

“This is going to contribute to the greenhouse gas situation,” Dozier says. Analyses of [different scenarios of growth](#) for Fresno County—developed by local planners under SB 375—bear out his conclusion.

Bernard Jimenez, Fresno County’s deputy director of planning, [has said](#) there’s a possibility that light rail will one day serve the area, alongside other environmental mitigations. Developers [have argued](#) that the Millerton community will be self-sufficient, with its own services and shopping, so residents won’t need to travel.

Either way, Jimenez believes that Millerton will be financially sound: “This is development that covers its own costs, and the community will maintain its own infrastructure. That’s been a fundamental policy of the county for decades.”

But that too is questionable, since county supervisors have encouraged the development by waiving the public-impact fees that developers would normally pay. These fees are usually considered key to growth “paying for

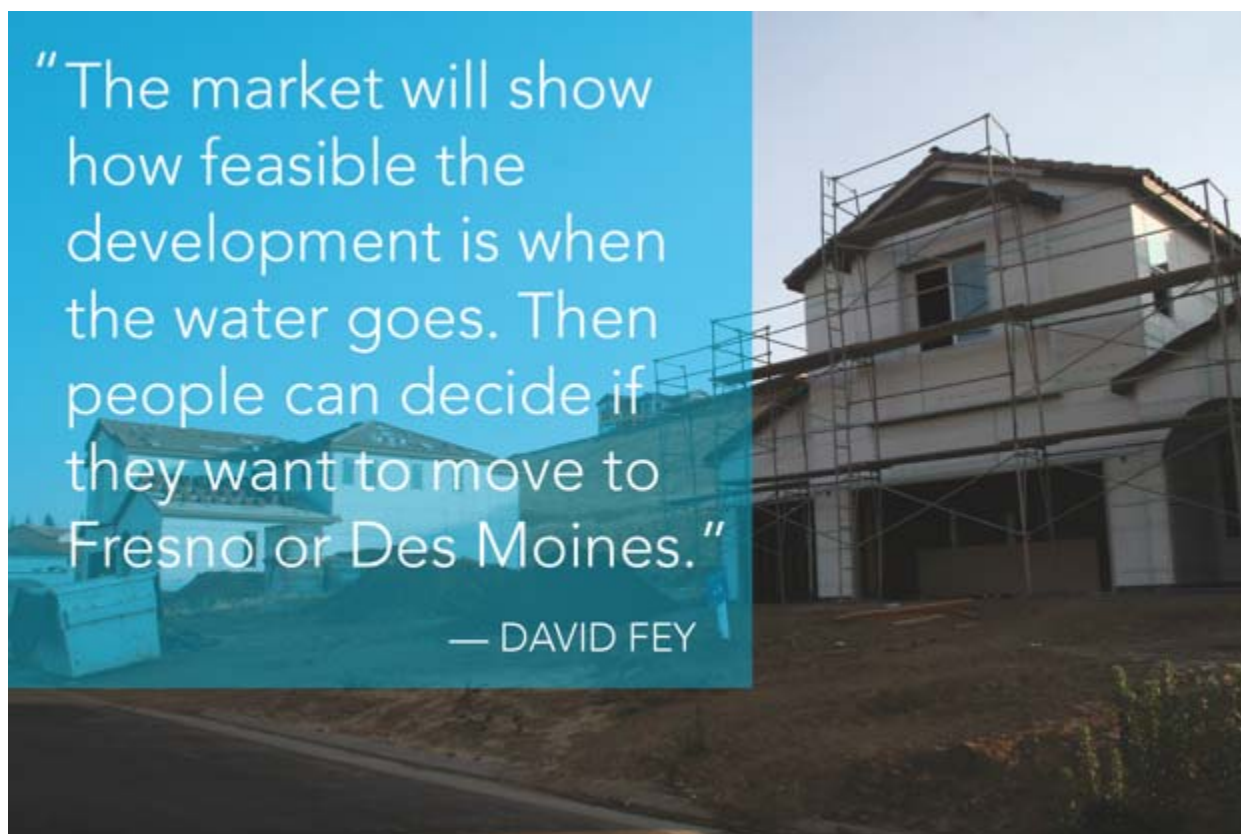
itself” —providing a funding source to build things like a sheriff sub-station, a library, an updated water treatment plant, and any other county facility that might eventually be necessary for a new community. That means residents may wind up needing to pay for those things out of pocket—which they may or may not be able to.

Then there’s the matter of water. El Niño or not, there will be future droughts. Water will become more expensive for all Californians, but especially so for residents of places like Millerton New Town—since, as an unincorporated community, it will have to support its water system without the economy of scale or managerial consistency afforded by a city.

Jimenez says the county has been stringent about its water-resource policies for new development. “Millerton New Town will not be relying on groundwater, but on surface water,” he says. “I see that as a big distinction.”

But in the past four years of drought, Millerton Lake water deliveries have been [anything but certain, even for longtime customers](#). Some developments adjacent to New Town rely on groundwater alone, which is only getting more scarce.

Whatever their water source, potential homebuyers in any new subdivision will need to keep their eyes open to the possibility of water costs becoming burdensome—or even of water running out, Perea told me. He said it’s conceivable that Millerton New Town will wind up needing to truck water in from somewhere else (as [some other California communities are doing](#)). He mentioned how the planned community of [Appaloosa Acres, to the north](#), has run out of groundwater and is now considering piping water in from Fresno.



What would happen if Millerton New Town ran dry? David Fey, executive officer of the Fresno County [Local Agency Formation Commission](#) followed that possibility to its economic endpoint.

"Ultimately, the market will show how feasible the development is when the water goes down," he says. "Then residents can decide if they want move to Fresno or Des Moines."

Of course, residents of poor, unincorporated communities have been struggling with water supply issues for years, and don't generally have the luxury of packing up for Iowa. Solorio feels discriminated against when she sees the county putting resources into a community that doesn't yet exist, while refusing to invest in her very real, struggling hometown. In so many meetings with county officials and in hearings in Sacramento, she says, she's been made to feel like she's asking for a handout.

"When you're investing in other places, there's not a problem," she tells me. "But when we ask, it is drama."

Jimenez says this comparison is apples to oranges, citing again his belief that developments in the Millerton area will be self-sustaining, unlike poor communities such as Lanare, where maintaining services has been a financial and managerial challenge.

But Perea, the county supervisor, is sympathetic to Solorio's critique. Even though he has supported the development of Millerton New Town, he says he would make the same argument if he were her. So why doesn't the county attend to places like Lanare the way it attends to wealthier residents?

Revenues. "It's age-old politics," he says. "Politicians react to one constituency more and less to another. You see the inequities of our decision-making every day."

The dream of smart growth

Lanare has about 125 houses and not much else. There is a two-room community center with a grassless baseball diamond behind it, and a single convenience store on Mount Whitney Avenue. Across the road are mostly fields.

It takes some imagination to see Lanare as something more, something bigger. But that's what Solorio wants: growth. She believes Lanare can support new, affordable housing for more people, eventually. "This is a good idea for the community," she says. "There is so much extra land."



There are certainly plenty of vacant parcels, and homes that sorely need updating to modern codes. But like many chronically underfunded, overlooked communities, Lanare lacks the most basic civic building blocks. The water system, namely, needs improvement: Community wells have been tainted with arsenic for years, as we learned in [previous stories](#). Though the state is lending support to building a new system, the community still needs to be able to run and maintain it at a sustainable cost—which takes, among other things, economy of scale.

"If this community is growing more, then we have more taxes for the CSD," says Solorio, referring to the volunteer-run committee that manages infrastructure. "Then the community uses the money to improve things."

It's a catch-22, of course. To grow, the community needs a reliable water system. To have a reliable water system, the community could use growth.

Yet Solorio isn't alone in wanting something more for her tiny town—and believing it can achieve it. Vance McKinney, the truck driver in Matheny Tract we met in [the previous story](#), expressed the same thought. North of Lanare in

Fresno County, other unincorporated communities are [banding together to support a collective economic development plan](#).

At a certain point, to entertain dreams of growth—and to simply be sustainable—these communities need capital. Given the tenets of smart growth, the state should want to invest in existing communities, too.

In 2012, on the heels of SB 375, California passed a bill requiring that a portion of the state's cap-and-trade revenues go to smart-growth projects in disadvantaged communities. Established soon after, the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) grant program awards those dollars to proposals for housing, transit, or infrastructure improvements that can be shown to reduce greenhouse gases. It is becoming an important avenue by which the poorest Californians can leverage the state's planning resources—but rural communities are still being left out.

In its first year, only one project serving the rural San Joaquin Valley won AHSC money: That vanpool program for farmworkers in the small city of Hanford received funds to expand.

It's hard for rural towns to prove, in numbers, that they can reduce greenhouse gases through things like denser housing or transit, says Veronica Garibay, co-director of the Leadership Counsel. Held up against communities with existing infrastructure like bus stops and sidewalks, places without them have smaller returns on investment. "You're never going to get the same results as West Oakland," Garibay says.

Yet the valley's poor, rural communities are disproportionately exposed to the environmental hazards that can result from bad planning. "They have all the need there is," says Dozier, the Fresno State economic development expert. "But they haven't been getting their share of cap-and-trade dollars."

This year, there are [new guidelines for the AHSC grants](#), and a new scoring system for proposals that weights greenhouse gas reductions and other co-benefits more proportionally. Plus, a pot of the money is now set aside for rural communities.

The hope now among advocates is that this funding can be used to help plan

for growth in places like Lanare. Once it has a better water system in place—which could be within the next year—Lanare may be better positioned to apply.

Still, it seems that the disadvantaged, rural communities most likely to get the grants are those that are actually closer to cities—[East Porterville](#), or [Matheny Tract](#), for example. Those communities badly need funds, too, and they're more geographically connected to existing transit, schools, and services next door.

Mike McCoy directed the committee that oversees the grant program up until this past July, and continues to advise it. He says he's most interested in seeing greenhouse gas reductions accrue over time "by building affordable housing in rural cities near schools, markets, services, and in sufficient quantity to create real community." That, he says, is what's most likely to reduce long drives in search of services.



Advocates say there needs to be more funding to address inequities in rural communities that is separate from greenhouse gas reductions, and McCoy agrees. There have been attempts in the state legislature, specifically by

Senate president pro tempore [Kevin de León](#), to dedicate this kind of money. They haven't passed yet, but de León is likely to try again. Says McCoy: "If our fiscal condition permits it, he might win the second time around."

In the meantime, the funding framework that's come out of SB 375 may continue to leave out communities that are starting from scratch. That's a shame not only for places like Lanare, but for the whole state, says Seaton, the co-director of the Leadership Counsel.

"There is an argument for these communities that goes beyond fairness," she says. "We as a state need to transform the way we plan and invest. If you keep leaving rural communities out, they will never be able to contribute."

"This is my home"

The mentality of sprawl may be particularly strong in Fresno County, but across the valley, development trends in the same vein: "[New towns](#)" [are popping up all over the place](#). The drought has shed light on deep disparities that short-sighted land-use planning has helped create for the valley's poorest communities; it is grim to imagine what the next drought [might reveal about wealthier ones](#).

As for water, there will need to be more ways to capture and stretch it out as California grows and dries. Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board, says a web of approaches are needed: "It's storage, conservation, recycling, stormwater capture, and desalination in appropriate cases." Developing ways to replenish groundwater supplies will be critical.

She adds, "Just giving out land-use and building permits when there might not be water isn't actually doing people a favor."

Linking water with land use will be a major challenge for the state in years to come, especially in the San Joaquin Valley.

Meanwhile, it's not clear what the future holds for the communities we've visited in this series. Lanare, Matheny Tract, and East Porterville are at different stages in attaining reliable access to water. Others throughout the valley are further behind. It shouldn't be this hard for Californians to have a resource [that](#)

[is their right](#). In some places, politics are moving out of the way, slowly and painfully. In other places, politics are not budging at all.

There is hope, at least, within Solorio. On a Monday afternoon, she and seven other Lanare residents gather on folding chairs in the community center, talking about what they hope to create here someday. Connie Hammond describes a sack-lunch program for those struggling to afford groceries. Ethel Myles wishes she had a sewer, so that she wouldn't have to worry about the septic tank overflowing when all of her grandchildren come over. Solorio talks about a park she saw one day in Fresno, where recycled water pours down from buckets to splash in. It gave her an idea for building a play structure out of recycled tires. "We need something like that, for kids to play in," Solorio says. But even a simple play structure will require money that the community just doesn't have yet.

"They call this the golden valley," she sighs. "But where is the gold?"

Solorio is going to keep looking.

About the Author



Laura Bliss is a staff writer at CityLab. She writes about public utilities, education, and cartography, among other topics.

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(Part 2)

Why California's Poorest Towns Still Can't Connect to Water

In the dried-out San Joaquin Valley, consolidating water systems brings out ugly politics.

LAURA BLISS |  @mslaurabliss | Oct 8, 2015 |  10 Comments



A man hauls boxes of bottled water into his home on the outskirts of Tulare, California. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

Editor's note: This story is part two of a three-part series on the future of the San Joaquin Valley's unincorporated communities. Read part one [here](#).

FRESNO, Calif.—In Matheny Tract, California, the sour odor of sewage is especially strong in the morning—and so is the irony that residents can't

connect to the system it represents.

The poor, unincorporated community of roughly 300 homes sits adjacent to the city of Tulare, population 61,000. A single, dusty field is all that separates Matheny Tract's mostly African-American and Latino residents from Tulare's recently expanded wastewater treatment plant. Though Tulare's sewer system is more robust than ever, Matheny Tract residents must use septic tanks, since they are not part of the city. For a dense settlement, this spells trouble.

"People can't always afford to pump out their tanks, so sometimes they overflow," says Vance McKinney, a 59-year-old truck driver and community leader. "I've watched children jump over ponds of sewage to get to school in the morning."

The leaching tanks are likely responsible for the fecal bacteria that's been found in the shallow community wells from which Matheny Tract gets its water. Nitrates, probably from fertilizer runoff from surrounding farms, have also been an issue. Right now, the biggest problem is naturally occurring arsenic, exacerbated by an [ever-shrinking volume of groundwater](#)—partly a result of excessive pumping by farmers in the midst of California's record-breaking drought.

Though residents can shower and clean with the water, it is undrinkable. For McKinney and his wife, that translates to spending an average \$160 on bottled water every month.

"We're blessed to be able to afford it, and some of our neighbors are, too," he says, taking a break from painting his house on a rare afternoon off from work. "But there are poor people out there who can't."

McKinney sits on the board of Pratt Mutual, the non-profit group that operates Matheny Tract's water system. Since the system's arsenic levels exceed EPA limits, Pratt Mutual is legally obligated to resolve the issue. In 2009, facing deteriorating pipes, little money, and a lack of government oversight, Pratt Mutual decided to seek a water system consolidation with the city of Tulare.

This was logical, as it is for many low-income county subdivisions that sit on the fringes of bigger towns in the San Joaquin Valley. When one water system

merges into another, more people pay to a single entity. That should mean the cost of water is lower for customers, and that there's more revenue to maintain infrastructure. Managerial and technical headaches are eliminated for the smaller community. Risk of contamination is lowered.

Consolidation also makes sense from a geographical standpoint: When precious water supplies and infrastructure are available mere blocks away, why refuse to extend it to people in need?



Caught between city and county governments, many of the San Joaquin Valley's poor, unincorporated communities lack the most basic services. Government neglect, disenfranchisement, and poor land-use planning have helped shape these disparities, as I explored in the [previous story in this series](#). A number of these towns have recently seen their wells go dry because of the drought. But for many more, water issues—especially contamination—are nothing new.

Because of the unprecedented drought, the gulfs in service between neighboring communities may finally begin to shrink. In June, California

lawmakers passed a bill enabling the State Water Resources Control Board to mandate certain water systems to merge. The legislation was both a reaction to the plight of dried-out communities and a result of years of work on the part of clean drinking-water advocates.

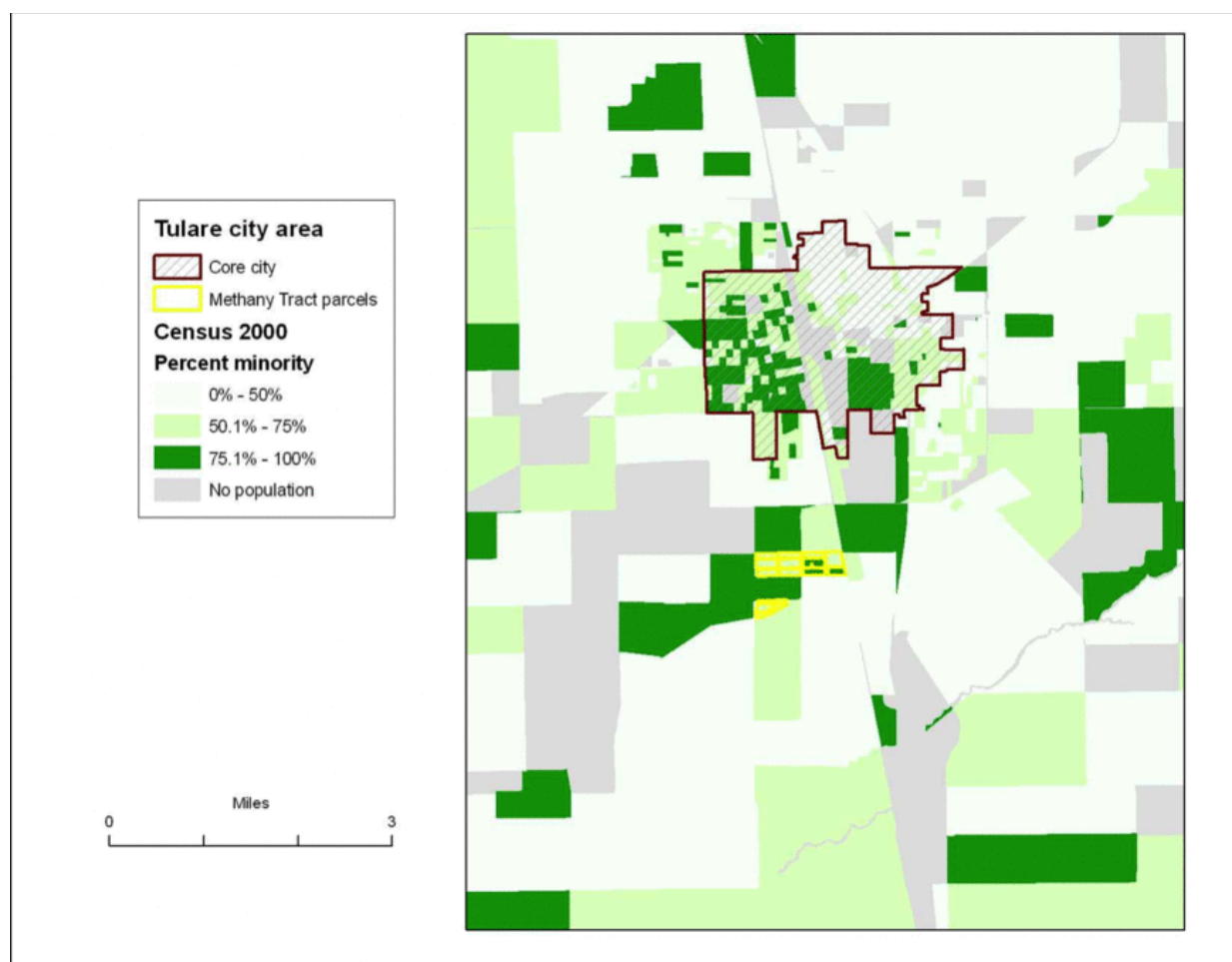
Drought consolidation, as the bill is known, is flanked by the governor's [\\$1 billion drought emergency bond package](#), as well as state drinking-water revolving funds. Both funding sources can assist disadvantaged communities facing severe water problems—even those that haven't been directly brought on by the drought.

But as with so much in the San Joaquin Valley's poorest towns, consolidation has proven harder than it should be. Though there's at least one success story, many cities want neither to annex nor extend services to low-income subdivisions, because the return on investment is so low. For too many thirsty people, old squabbles, inequitable planning, and deep-rooted prejudices put a fundamental need—water—even further out of reach.

Broken promises, ulterior motives

Matheny Tract was one of many pieces of far-flung county land settled by African-American farmworkers in the San Joaquin Valley during the mid-20th century. Migrating from the east, these workers and their families were often locked out of the Valley's cities by high prices or, in many cases, overtly discriminatory real-estate practices. Land buyers—traveling salesman-types—took advantage, snapping up large tracts and parceling them off to people with few other choices.

That's why, at its founding, Matheny Tract sat a fair distance away from the city of Tulare. But Tulare has crept up to it over the years. When you look at maps of the city of Tulare's annexation patterns going back to the 1960s, a pattern becomes clear.



City of Tulare annexation history and patterns of development (Based on slides courtesy of California Rural Legal Assistance)

“The city has pursued land that it can use to generate sales and property taxes,” says Ashley Werner, an attorney at the [Leadership Council for Justice and Accountability](#), which provides legal assistance to Matheny Tract. “They’ve annexed for industrial use, residential use, commercial use, and everything else.” But Tulare has never annexed Matheny Tract, or extended services to it.

So it is somewhat surprising that, when Matheny Tract asked Tulare to consider allowing them to consolidate with its water system back in 2009, the city said yes. A feasibility study was conducted and proved the connection workable. Matheny Tract applied for and obtained grant funding from the state’s Drinking Water Program to pay for new pipes to connect the community to the city.

In 2011, with funding in order, the city of Tulare, Tulare County, and Matheny Tract all jointly agreed that the city would merge its water system with

Matheny Tract's. That meant Pratt Mutual, the entity that manages Matheny Tract's water system, would be totally dissolved. The city of Tulare would supply water, manage infrastructure, and bill and treat Matheny Tract customers as they would any others. Construction on the new water lines began.

But in June 2014, as workers were putting finishing touches on the pipes, plans changed: Tulare city officials announced that they were not, in fact, able to manage the consolidation. The well originally designated to serve Matheny Tract had been taken out of commission due to capacity concerns, and there was no back-up. Plus, while the new water lines were being laid in Matheny Tract, Tulare had approved connections on several hundred new homes in other developments. According to Tulare, all of this was now straining its ability to serve existing customers.

Tulare called for a hydrological study of its system, which, after several months, revealed that there was a pressure problem. Now, more than a year later, the city [has said](#) that that issue is nearly resolved. But it still won't consolidate. Despite the agreement signed by the city, county, and community, Joseph Carlini, director of Public Works of the city of Tulare, now says there are jurisdictional issues.

"I can't go in and service their pipes. I can't go in and tell them how to use their water. It's not city property. They're unincorporated," he says.

When Matheny Tract insisted that this curious backtracking violated the terms of their agreement, Tulare sued to change those terms. Now, instead of consolidating, the Tulare wants to to sell water to Matheny Tract at wholesale and let Pratt Mutual continue to handle administration and maintenance. The suit also asks for the county to clarify the city's jurisdiction. The county [has called the city's lawsuit](#) "utterly without merit." In June, Matheny Tract counter-sued to get what it agreed upon. Meanwhile, the community's brand-new pipes are still sitting dry.

"If I had the skills to turn the water on myself, I would," says McKinney, the Matheny Tract resident. "There are eight or nine people on [the city of Tulare's water board]. Eight or nine people, and they can't come together and decide

they're going to help us?"



Carlini, Tulare's public works director, believes the city is trying to help by offering the water at wholesale. "It's not that we don't want to provide service to them," he says. "We just want some way of controlling stuff."

But that's not the same as accepting Matheny Tract residents as full-fledged customers. A July 2014 letter (obtained through Werner) from Tulare City Manager Don Dorman to a county resource analyst provides some insight on what the city is really after. Dorman, who did not respond to interview requests, opens the letter (a follow-up on a meeting) by suggesting that he puts Tulare's own growth ahead of helping Matheny Tract:

We especially appreciated County representatives' understanding that the City's first priority must be to maintain its water system for existing City customers and for new City development commitments.

Besides the need to cover connections in these new developments, Dorman lists several other "structural issues" involved in consolidating with Matheny Tract. These include "cross-connection pollution potential"; dealing with "parties who illegally 'hot-tap' into the pipeline"; the need for "sheriff protection for billing enforcers"; and, namely, the "City General Plan":

The new City General Plan is expected to clarify that the City has no intentions of growth and development into the area southwest of the railroad tracks on the southwest portion of the City. This policy is specifically designed to protect the operational integrity of the City's key economic asset: its newly expanded state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plant. The City also intends to preserve an agricultural buffer around the plant for its operational needs ... Growth into this area... is contrary to sound land use planning.

That "agricultural buffer" around the plant is effectively what surrounds Matheny Tract.

Now the State Water Resources Control Board has joined the fray. In mid-August, Tulare and Matheny Tract were the first in the state to be served with letters mandating that they consolidate water systems. As of August, they have six months to come up with a plan on their own. To help, the state will fund necessary infrastructure updates, provide technical assistance, and absolve all liabilities associated with Tulare inheriting Matheny's system. But if the communities don't come to an agreement on how to do this, the state will

force one. Somehow.

“The hope is that our work is going to help people overcome their issues voluntarily,” says Karen Larsen, assistant deputy director of the State Water Resource Control Board’s Division of Drinking Water. “We have to figure out what the issues are. There are going to be situations where it’s never going to happen.”

McKinney is hopeful that Matheny Tract will get the water it is due, now that the state is involved.

“The question is, when? It’s been six years,” he says.

In spite of all the conflict, and years of separation, McKinney believes Matheny Tract would be better off if it were annexed by the city. Some years ago, he tried to petition for annexation among other residents. But he says they were fearful of losing the freedoms they have on unincorporated land: low taxes, their ability to keep farm animals and commercial vehicles, and a certain “rural” identity.

McKinney, however, envisions what the community has to gain: lighting, curbs, gutters, sewers, and a sense of equality. “If we get annexed, praise that. If we stay an island, okay,” he says. “I just wanted to be treated fairly.”

“Those people won’t pay”

To Larsen’s point, there probably are places where consolidation will never happen. One of them might be Lanare—the Fresno County subdivision I focused on in the [first story in this series](#). Much like Matheny Track, Lanare residents are predominantly African-American and Latino. Their water system is tainted with arsenic.



View of Tulare’s wastewater treatment plant (outlined in upper left corner) and Matheny Tract (outlined in lower right). The diagonal route right of Matheny Tract is the railroad referred to by Dorman. (Google Earth)

Riverdale, the somewhat wealthier, whiter town next door, is also unincorporated, and has also had its share of arsenic spikes. But with more financial and managerial capital, it has been able to resolve its water problems. Lanare and its legal advocates have asked Riverdale to consider consolidation on multiple occasions, even pleading with state lawmakers to intervene. But Riverdale has continually refused.

Merging with Lanare's aging water system could be costly and full of liabilities. But legal advocates told me that the state, which currently holds Lanare's water system in receivership, is planning to drill new wells for Lanare in addition to replacing the community's aging pipes.

Between the new infrastructure, increased capacity, and all of the funds available through the state, consolidation could be a safe bet. But Lanare's debts, incurred by a mismanaged, disused arsenic treatment plant the community took a risk on years back, seem to be too much of a threat.

"Consolidation is a terrible idea," says Buddy Mendes, the county supervisor who oversees both communities, and who lives in Riverdale. "They'd never be able to pay [Riverdale] back." When I suggested that consolidation would offer greater economy of scale, he said, "For who? Not for Riverdale."

Ronald Bass, operator of Riverdale's public utility district, wouldn't respond to requests for an interview. But he has [stated his opposition to consolidation before](#): "Those people won't pay."

As in Matheny Tract, people in Lanare say Riverdale's recalcitrance is about more than just cost.

"There's always been a separation," says Connie Hammond, a 73-year-old retiree who no longer lives in Lanare but returns to volunteer with the community. "It's like, 'you're there, we're here.' They're always kind of ... looking down, actually."

Ethel Myles has lived in Lanare for nearly all of her 68 years. Much as she wants the clean water, she's not certain consolidation is the best option. "It would probably be beneficial," she says. "But they wouldn't ever accept us."



From my conversations with residents and officials, it’s hard to imagine Lanare customers ever being treated the same as Riverdale customers, even if they were both paying to a single district. Another option for Lanare would be for the state to appoint a private, investor-owned utility to manage it—though residents have said they don’t want that.

Mount Whitney Avenue, the same road that Lanare hinges on, serves as Riverdale’s main street. There are shops and restaurants, and on the morning that I visited, a little league sign-up tent was set up on the sidewalk. I chatted with the people manning the tent about how the drought was affecting local businesses. Then I asked how Lanare was doing with water.

“Oh, them. They’ve got a checkered past,” said one man, a state corrections officer who asked that his name not be used. Though he wasn’t sure about Riverdale’s official reason for rejecting consolidation, he did say this about Lanare: “They’re always looking for a handout.”

A community wins

Change comes incrementally, and usually by force. But it can come. The story of Cameron Creek Colony is an example.

A square in a patchwork of walnut groves, the low-income, 100-home county subdivision has a rural feel—even though Farmersville, a city of 11,000, has partly grown up around it.

Resident Roger McGill remembers what is now unimaginable: when there was water in Cameron Creek. Standing on a front porch trimmed with wind-chimes and spinners, the 69-year-old points beyond the houses across the street, toward the now-dry waterbody that gave his hometown its name. “You used to be able to take a boat out there,” he says. “The water was so high, it used to flood.”

For decades, Cameron Creek residents were self-reliant, using domestic wells with a clean supply. Then the drought came four years ago. No rainfall, no creek, and little by little, no groundwater.

“I could have never imagined this,” McGill says, surveying his dusty yard. It once had a lawn, shrubs, and flowers, he says. “Now it kind of looks like a junk pile.”

In the summer of 2014, wells in Cameron Creek began to go dry. The adjacent Farmersville water district, meanwhile, continued to serve their customers without issue.

Paul Boyer is mayor pro tempore of Farmersville. He’s also one of the directors of Self-Help Enterprises, a non-profit that helps construct homes and make service connections for low-income families in the region. One August morning during my week in the San Joaquin Valley, he accompanied me around Cameron Creek.

Before the drought, Cameron Creek wanted nothing to do with a community water system, Boyer says. “But priorities change.”

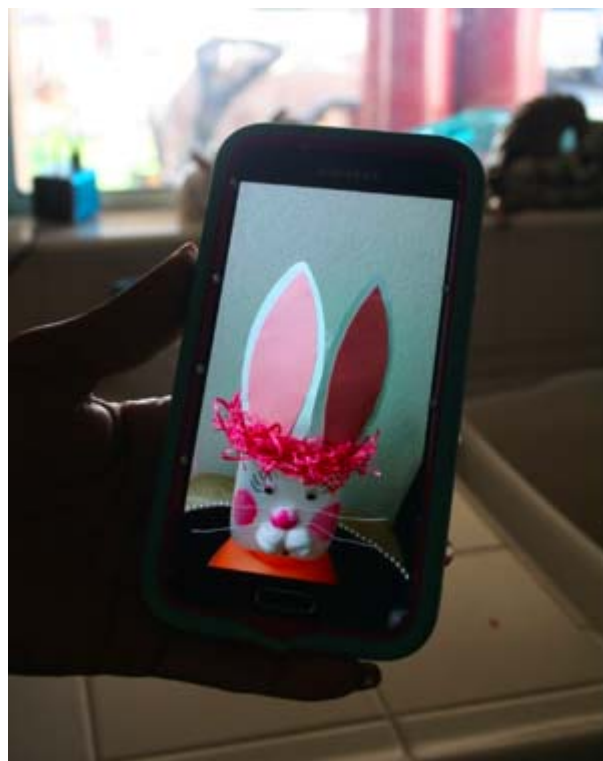
Residents badly needed water. One option, which had been debated over the years, was to petition for Cameron Creek to be annexed into Farmersville, and thereby included in its water services. By and large, Cameron Creek residents

still weren't interested in giving up their unincorporated status, for the same reasons that many Matheny Tract residents aren't.

But Farmersville could help Cameron Creek without annexing it, and Boyer's liaison position helped them do that—in record time. Within months of the wells running dry, Farmersville secured state and federal grants to extend a water main to Cameron Creek. Residents who opted in paid a few hundred dollars to connect to the main, plus a small city hook-up fee. Less than a year later, most Cameron Creek households were customers of the Farmersville water district. They're still outside municipal limits—an arrangement that pleases Farmersville officials, too.

"The city doesn't want to be annexing an area where there's not much tax base and a lot of need," Boyer says. "It's a win-win situation."

Smart growth for small communities



Solorio's Easter egg basket made from a water jug.

In my previous story, we met Isabel Solorio, a housekeeper and community activist in Lanare. Like Vance McKinney in Matheny Tract, Solorio has hopes for her community beyond consolidation. "It's fair to have dreams," she says. "I want to keep working to have basic resources. Not luxuries, but basic needs: water, sidewalks, streetlights, and sewers. A park where our kids can play."

Solorio shows me pictures of how she's been recycling her old plastic water jugs, which the state delivers to Lanare residents for free. Last spring, she sliced off the bottoms, turned them upside down, decorated them

with construction paper, and filled them with candy. Poof: Easter-egg baskets for kids in Lanare.

It's for the young people, Solorio says, that she really wants to see her community attract new development: New houses, new families, and a long-term future.

Her dream of growth might be compatible with what's happening in the San Joaquin Valley. It's predicted that by 2050, [nearly 7 million people](#) will live across its eight counties, about 50 percent more than do today. High-speed rail is supposed to help accommodate and shape new development in the region's cities. "[Smart growth](#)" is often touted as a key component of the San Joaquin Valley's future success.

But smart growth would seem to preclude places like Lanare and Matheny Tract, which have scarcely had a chance to grow at all. At the same time, sprawl continues, and new subdivisions keep popping up, far from city services. Resources—money and water—are limited. Existing communities are finding themselves competing against envisioned ones.

Driving back from Cameron Creek Colony to Self-Help Enterprises' offices in the city of Visalia, I ask Boyer what he thinks about the future of towns like Cameron Creek Colony, Matheny Tract, and Lanare. Even with consolidation, can they be become truly sustainable? Will they grow with the Valley, or will they vanish with the water?

"I think you want to provide services to make these communities as livable as possible," he says. "But not develop more of them."

Next week, we'll see how that's going.

About the Author



Laura Bliss is a staff writer at CityLab. She writes about public utilities, education, and cartography, among other topics.

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(Part 3)

For California's Drought Towns, the Next Challenge Is Growth

As development booms in the San Joaquin Valley, poor communities see both opportunity and heartbreak.

LAURA BLISS |  @mslaurabliss | Oct 19, 2015 |  3 Comments



A sign is posted near a cluster of vacant homes in Sacramento County, just north of California's San Joaquin Valley. (REUTERS/Robert Galbraith)

Editor's note: This story is the last in a three-part series on the future of the San Joaquin Valley's unincorporated communities. Read parts [one](#) and [two](#).

FRESNO, Calif.—In the 600-person, unincorporated community of Lanare, travel options are limited. One bus heads 30 miles to Fresno in the morning,

then comes back in the evening. It takes roughly two hours each way.

So Isabel Solorio, a 50-year-old housekeeper and community activist, relies on her old Chevy Suburban to get to doctors' appointments, clients' homes, and stores. Though tomatoes, asparagus, garlic, and grapes all grow within miles of Lanare, there's nowhere to buy truly affordable produce short of Fresno. She goes there weekly, and buys everything she can.

"Paying for so much all at once is very expensive," she says. On the floor of her gleaming kitchen in Lanare sit small pallets of melons and tomatoes. "Gas to the big store is also expensive." Between her needs and her husband's commute to the fields, Solorio estimates they spend more than \$200 per week on fuel for hundreds of miles traveled.

In the sprawling, disconnected San Joaquin Valley, home to four million residents, a lot of people get around like Solorio does. Emissions from transportation, mostly from trucks, are what primarily make the region's air quality among the worst in the nation, despite some improvements in the last decade. As [many as 21 percent of adults have asthma here](#)—Solorio included—[and 24 percent of children](#). There's a disparate impact at play: The zip codes with the highest rate of respiratory risk have poor and predominantly Hispanic populations. And lately, the drought has made air even more unbreathable.

Air pollution is another byproduct of the San Joaquin Valley's legacy of short-sighted, inequitable land-use planning. Other outcomes, as we've seen in [previous stories](#), include dry wells in the midst of drought, mismanaged, contaminated water systems, and septic tanks that leach into the aquifer. We've seen how [poor, unincorporated communities of color](#) are disproportionately affected by these gaps in basic services, and are often disenfranchised by local governance structures from [finding lasting solutions](#).

Yet more people are coming to the San Joaquin Valley. Projected to gain three million residents by 2050, the region is growing faster than nearly anywhere else in the country. [According to forecasts](#), most new migrants will be Hispanic and have low incomes. Some will be professionals priced out of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Still others will be wealthier retirees, moving in from the

coasts. The [advent of high-speed rail](#) will bring in even more new faces from across the demographic spectrum.

Will the valley's growth take shape as it has historically has—spread out and uneven? Or will it be something more sustainable and just? And, crucially, where will the water come from?

In the heart of the valley, Fresno County offers some indications.

A new era in planning

In 2008, California became first in the nation to pass a law linking climate change with the way we build towns and cities. The landmark Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act, [SB 375](#), required regions to start planning with a goal to reduce greenhouse gases, mainly by reducing trips in cars. This is meant to be achieved with effective new transit options, denser housing through infill and mixed-use development, and updated, "greener" infrastructure to support it all.

"Smart growth," as this planning framework is often called, discourages sprawling into undeveloped, isolated places, and encourages redeveloping what already exists. In the agricultural mecca of the San Joaquin Valley, it also means conserving prime farmland.

“The entire state needs to transform the way we plan and invest. If you leave them out, rural communities will never be able to contribute.”

— PHOEBE SEATON



In growing Fresno County, some towns are taking steps to contribute to the state’s goals. In particular, the city of Fresno, the largest in the San Joaquin Valley, has been encouraging infill, revamping its inner core, and developing green spaces. (James Fallows has detailed Fresno’s renaissance at [The Atlantic](#).) In the town of Reedley, 25 miles southeast of Fresno, a planned [mixed-use housing development](#) will run on solar power and send its treated wastewater back into the aquifer. Hanford, a town of 54,000, has created a successful vanpool program used mainly by low-income workers, one of the first of its kind in the valley.

But in a county that’s strapped for cash and searching for a broader tax base, “smart growth” is getting lost in the economics and politics of general growth. Subdivisions just keep getting developed. And some of these new towns may wind up with problems that poor, unincorporated communities have lived with for years.

Sprawl dies hard

On an August evening around sunset, the light on Millerton Lake is beautiful, if

a little ominous. Bathtub rings etched into the soft brown foothills around the lake glow pink. In California's fourth year of drought, the lake—really an artificial reservoir—is at [35 percent capacity](#).

Standing on the massive boat ramp that slopes to the water's edge, I can see the frames of houses perched on a crest. There's lots of new development in this area, 35 minutes northeast of the city of Fresno. Tucked further back in the hills, for example, lie the beginnings of a master-planned, unincorporated community called Millerton New Town.

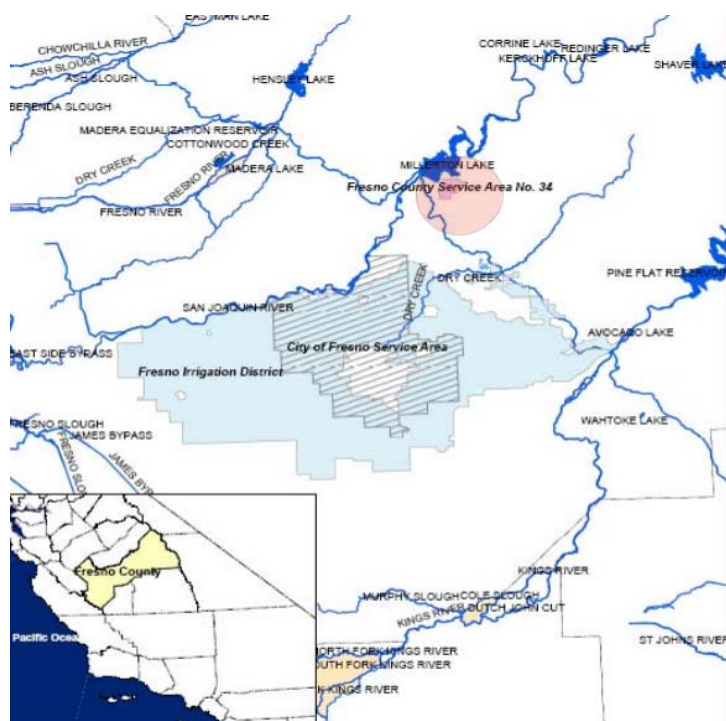
At least 4,500 homes are slated for construction, enough to house [10,000 to 12,000 people, according to planners](#). Some houses are already occupied or ready to be, and run from around \$300,000 to \$900,000 based on a Zillow search. Blueprints for a pharmacy school, projected to draw [2,000 students and nearly 300 faculty and staff](#), are also taking shape. Roughly half of the student body will be housed on the school's campus.

Millerton New Town had been a 2,000-acre twinkle in Fresno County's general plan as far back as the mid-1980s. Officials tell me it never progressed because of concerns about [service reliability](#). But in recent years, new development across the Madera County border got Fresno County eyeing Millerton more aggressively. In 2011, the state granted permission for the community to source water from Millerton Lake. That same year, developers broke ground.

"We thought, before our residents jump into new houses in Madera and we lose the tax base, let's at least provide them an opportunity to stay here," says Henry Perea, one of five Fresno County supervisors.

Millerton New Town may very well provide short-term revenues to the county, but from long-term environmental and financial standpoints, it risks unsustainability, officials and experts told me. It may also perpetuate challenges of water access and affordability that have plagued the region for so long.

"Millerton New Town appears to spit in the face of SB 375," says Mike Dozier, executive director of both Fresno State University's Office of Economic and Community Development and the California Partnership for the San Joaquin



Fresno County Service Area 34, circled in pink, covers Millerton New Town. ([U.S. Bureau of Reclamation](#))

Valley, a non-profit promoting regional growth. “Those students are not all going to be living on campus. People that work there aren’t going to want to live there. They will be commuting from Fresno.”

Right now, there is only one access road that serves Millerton New Town. It’s the same one that boaters and jet-skiers take to get to the lake’s recreation area, and the same one revelers take to roll the dice at a nearby tribal casino. That road will likely

need widening to serve more vehicles going up and down the hill.

“This is going to contribute to the greenhouse gas situation,” Dozier says. Analyses of [different scenarios of growth](#) for Fresno County—developed by local planners under SB 375—bear out his conclusion.

Bernard Jimenez, Fresno County’s deputy director of planning, [has said](#) there’s a possibility that light rail will one day serve the area, alongside other environmental mitigations. Developers [have argued](#) that the Millerton community will be self-sufficient, with its own services and shopping, so residents won’t need to travel.

Either way, Jimenez believes that Millerton will be financially sound: “This is development that covers its own costs, and the community will maintain its own infrastructure. That’s been a fundamental policy of the county for decades.”

But that too is questionable, since county supervisors have encouraged the development by waiving the public-impact fees that developers would normally pay. These fees are usually considered key to growth “paying for

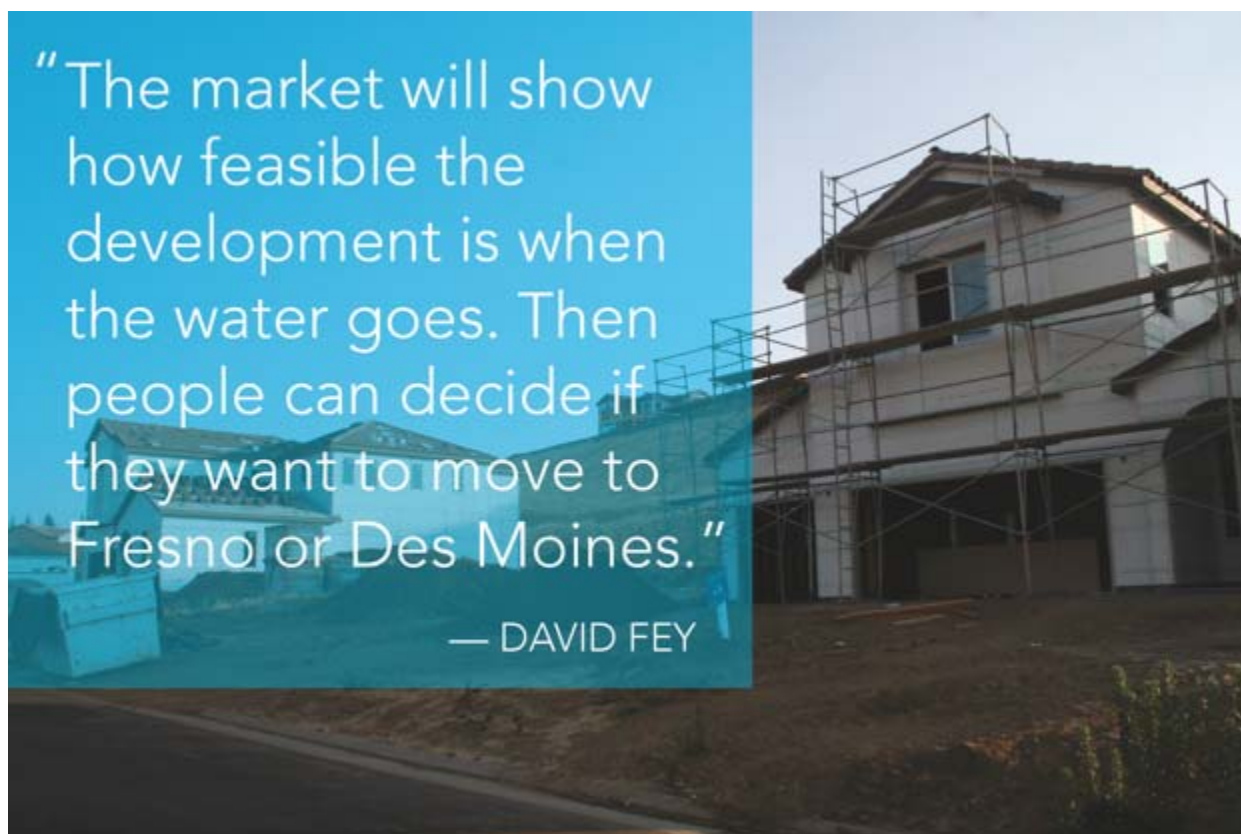
itself” —providing a funding source to build things like a sheriff sub-station, a library, an updated water treatment plant, and any other county facility that might eventually be necessary for a new community. That means residents may wind up needing to pay for those things out of pocket—which they may or may not be able to.

Then there’s the matter of water. El Niño or not, there will be future droughts. Water will become more expensive for all Californians, but especially so for residents of places like Millerton New Town—since, as an unincorporated community, it will have to support its water system without the economy of scale or managerial consistency afforded by a city.

Jimenez says the county has been stringent about its water-resource policies for new development. “Millerton New Town will not be relying on groundwater, but on surface water,” he says. “I see that as a big distinction.”

But in the past four years of drought, Millerton Lake water deliveries have been [anything but certain, even for longtime customers](#). Some developments adjacent to New Town rely on groundwater alone, which is only getting more scarce.

Whatever their water source, potential homebuyers in any new subdivision will need to keep their eyes open to the possibility of water costs becoming burdensome—or even of water running out, Perea told me. He said it’s conceivable that Millerton New Town will wind up needing to truck water in from somewhere else (as [some other California communities are doing](#)). He mentioned how the planned community of [Appaloosa Acres, to the north](#), has run out of groundwater and is now considering piping water in from Fresno.



What would happen if Millerton New Town ran dry? David Fey, executive officer of the Fresno County [Local Agency Formation Commission](#) followed that possibility to its economic endpoint.

"Ultimately, the market will show how feasible the development is when the water goes down," he says. "Then residents can decide if they want move to Fresno or Des Moines."

Of course, residents of poor, unincorporated communities have been struggling with water supply issues for years, and don't generally have the luxury of packing up for Iowa. Solorio feels discriminated against when she sees the county putting resources into a community that doesn't yet exist, while refusing to invest in her very real, struggling hometown. In so many meetings with county officials and in hearings in Sacramento, she says, she's been made to feel like she's asking for a handout.

"When you're investing in other places, there's not a problem," she tells me. "But when we ask, it is drama."

Jimenez says this comparison is apples to oranges, citing again his belief that developments in the Millerton area will be self-sustaining, unlike poor communities such as Lanare, where maintaining services has been a financial and managerial challenge.

But Perea, the county supervisor, is sympathetic to Solorio's critique. Even though he has supported the development of Millerton New Town, he says he would make the same argument if he were her. So why doesn't the county attend to places like Lanare the way it attends to wealthier residents?

Revenues. "It's age-old politics," he says. "Politicians react to one constituency more and less to another. You see the inequities of our decision-making every day."

The dream of smart growth

Lanare has about 125 houses and not much else. There is a two-room community center with a grassless baseball diamond behind it, and a single convenience store on Mount Whitney Avenue. Across the road are mostly fields.

It takes some imagination to see Lanare as something more, something bigger. But that's what Solorio wants: growth. She believes Lanare can support new, affordable housing for more people, eventually. "This is a good idea for the community," she says. "There is so much extra land."



There are certainly plenty of vacant parcels, and homes that sorely need updating to modern codes. But like many chronically underfunded, overlooked communities, Lanare lacks the most basic civic building blocks. The water system, namely, needs improvement: Community wells have been tainted with arsenic for years, as we learned in [previous stories](#). Though the state is lending support to building a new system, the community still needs to be able to run and maintain it at a sustainable cost—which takes, among other things, economy of scale.

"If this community is growing more, then we have more taxes for the CSD," says Solorio, referring to the volunteer-run committee that manages infrastructure. "Then the community uses the money to improve things."

It's a catch-22, of course. To grow, the community needs a reliable water system. To have a reliable water system, the community could use growth.

Yet Solorio isn't alone in wanting something more for her tiny town—and believing it can achieve it. Vance McKinney, the truck driver in Matheny Tract we met in [the previous story](#), expressed the same thought. North of Lanare in

Fresno County, other unincorporated communities are [banding together to support a collective economic development plan](#).

At a certain point, to entertain dreams of growth—and to simply be sustainable—these communities need capital. Given the tenets of smart growth, the state should want to invest in existing communities, too.

In 2012, on the heels of SB 375, California passed a bill requiring that a portion of the state's cap-and-trade revenues go to smart-growth projects in disadvantaged communities. Established soon after, the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) grant program awards those dollars to proposals for housing, transit, or infrastructure improvements that can be shown to reduce greenhouse gases. It is becoming an important avenue by which the poorest Californians can leverage the state's planning resources—but rural communities are still being left out.

In its first year, only one project serving the rural San Joaquin Valley won AHSC money: That vanpool program for farmworkers in the small city of Hanford received funds to expand.

It's hard for rural towns to prove, in numbers, that they can reduce greenhouse gases through things like denser housing or transit, says Veronica Garibay, co-director of the Leadership Counsel. Held up against communities with existing infrastructure like bus stops and sidewalks, places without them have smaller returns on investment. "You're never going to get the same results as West Oakland," Garibay says.

Yet the valley's poor, rural communities are disproportionately exposed to the environmental hazards that can result from bad planning. "They have all the need there is," says Dozier, the Fresno State economic development expert. "But they haven't been getting their share of cap-and-trade dollars."

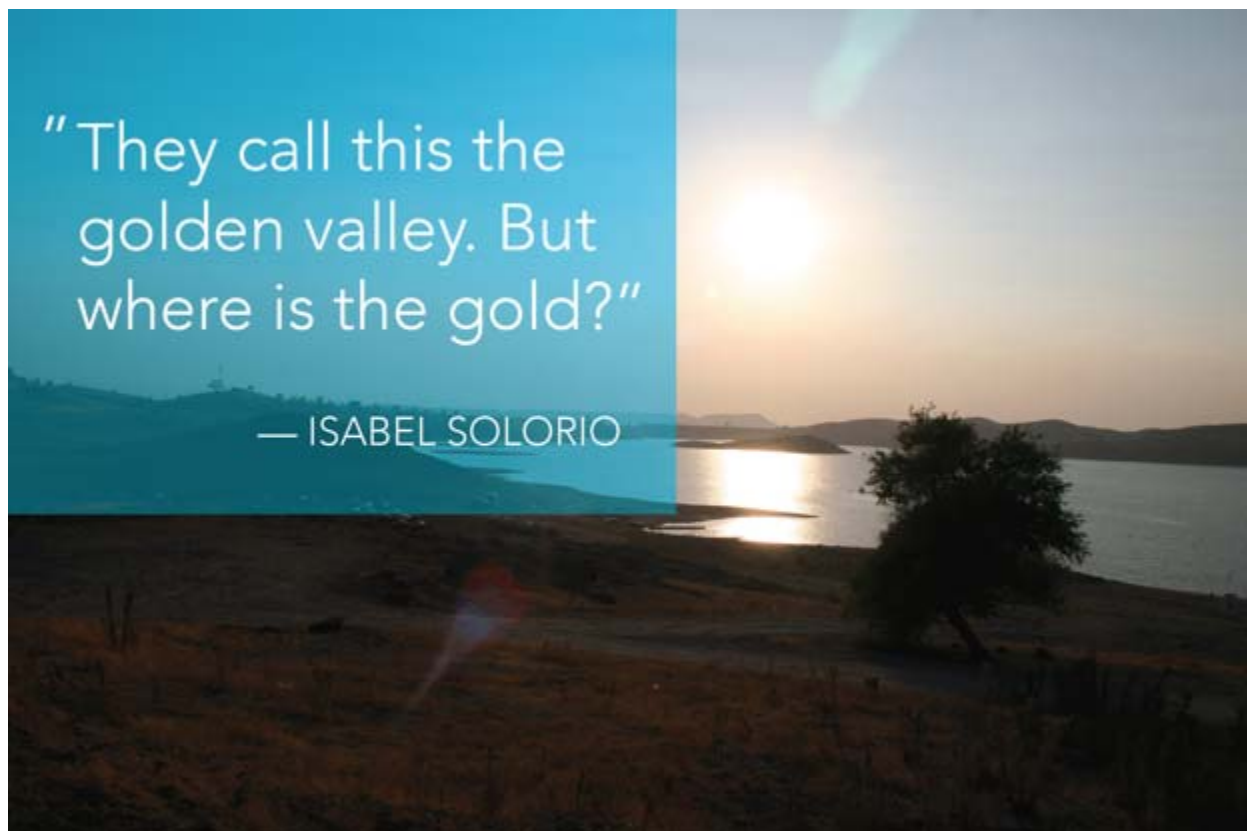
This year, there are [new guidelines for the AHSC grants](#), and a new scoring system for proposals that weights greenhouse gas reductions and other co-benefits more proportionally. Plus, a pot of the money is now set aside for rural communities.

The hope now among advocates is that this funding can be used to help plan

for growth in places like Lanare. Once it has a better water system in place—which could be within the next year—Lanare may be better positioned to apply.

Still, it seems that the disadvantaged, rural communities most likely to get the grants are those that are actually closer to cities—[East Porterville](#), or [Matheny Tract](#), for example. Those communities badly need funds, too, and they're more geographically connected to existing transit, schools, and services next door.

Mike McCoy directed the committee that oversees the grant program up until this past July, and continues to advise it. He says he's most interested in seeing greenhouse gas reductions accrue over time "by building affordable housing in rural cities near schools, markets, services, and in sufficient quantity to create real community." That, he says, is what's most likely to reduce long drives in search of services.



Advocates say there needs to be more funding to address inequities in rural communities that is separate from greenhouse gas reductions, and McCoy agrees. There have been attempts in the state legislature, specifically by

Senate president pro tempore [Kevin de León](#), to dedicate this kind of money. They haven't passed yet, but de León is likely to try again. Says McCoy: "If our fiscal condition permits it, he might win the second time around."

In the meantime, the funding framework that's come out of SB 375 may continue to leave out communities that are starting from scratch. That's a shame not only for places like Lanare, but for the whole state, says Seaton, the co-director of the Leadership Counsel.

"There is an argument for these communities that goes beyond fairness," she says. "We as a state need to transform the way we plan and invest. If you keep leaving rural communities out, they will never be able to contribute."

"This is my home"

The mentality of sprawl may be particularly strong in Fresno County, but across the valley, development trends in the same vein: "[New towns](#)" [are popping up all over the place](#). The drought has shed light on deep disparities that short-sighted land-use planning has helped create for the valley's poorest communities; it is grim to imagine what the next drought [might reveal about wealthier ones](#).

As for water, there will need to be more ways to capture and stretch it out as California grows and dries. Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board, says a web of approaches are needed: "It's storage, conservation, recycling, stormwater capture, and desalination in appropriate cases." Developing ways to replenish groundwater supplies will be critical.

She adds, "Just giving out land-use and building permits when there might not be water isn't actually doing people a favor."

Linking water with land use will be a major challenge for the state in years to come, especially in the San Joaquin Valley.

Meanwhile, it's not clear what the future holds for the communities we've visited in this series. Lanare, Matheny Tract, and East Porterville are at different stages in attaining reliable access to water. Others throughout the valley are further behind. It shouldn't be this hard for Californians to have a resource [that](#)

[is their right](#). In some places, politics are moving out of the way, slowly and painfully. In other places, politics are not budging at all.

There is hope, at least, within Solorio. On a Monday afternoon, she and seven other Lanare residents gather on folding chairs in the community center, talking about what they hope to create here someday. Connie Hammond describes a sack-lunch program for those struggling to afford groceries. Ethel Myles wishes she had a sewer, so that she wouldn't have to worry about the septic tank overflowing when all of her grandchildren come over. Solorio talks about a park she saw one day in Fresno, where recycled water pours down from buckets to splash in. It gave her an idea for building a play structure out of recycled tires. "We need something like that, for kids to play in," Solorio says. But even a simple play structure will require money that the community just doesn't have yet.

"They call this the golden valley," she sighs. "But where is the gold?"

Solorio is going to keep looking.

About the Author



Laura Bliss is a staff writer at CityLab. She writes about public utilities, education, and cartography, among other topics.

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Contra Costa Times

http://www.contracostatimes.com/news/ci_28963915/guest-commentary:-bryan-scott:-east-contra-cost-fire-district-needs-help

Guest Commentary: Bryan Scott: East Contra Costa Fire District needs help

By *Bryan Scott* POSTED: 10/09/2015 12:00:00 AM PDT

The residents of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District are being treated as second-class citizens in the Contra Costa County government services community, and 105,000 inhabitants of the 249-square mile district are being shortchanged in the area of fire and emergency services. This underfunding puts lives and property at risk.

Fifteen years ago the CCC Board of Supervisors was looking for ways to improve services and save money. At that time there were three mostly rural fire districts using a pay-on-call staffing model to economize. Some called it a volunteer fire department approach, even though the firefighters were trained, equipped and compensated for their time.

By bringing the three districts together, a hired consultant said, the administration, management and training of the combined forces could be performed more economically. Response times would be shortened, the number of firefighters would go up, and lives would be saved.

And since these districts were being funded based on population sizes from 25 years earlier, consolidation seemed like the best way to squeeze every last drop of service out of the limited tax dollars being spent. The CCC publicity campaign at the time projected savings of almost 14 percent of the \$6,423,112.00 combined organizational budget.

Back then the property tax allocation rate for the ECCFPD was set at about 8 percent, meaning that out of each property tax dollar that was generated within the district, the ECCFPD got eight cents.

Fire districts in other, more populated and developed parts of the county received much more, averaging about 12 cents from each dollar.

Today, when Brentwood's population has soared to nearly 60,000 residents and the number

of Oakley residents is approaching 40,000, the tax allocation rate is the same. The tax allocation rate for a rural farming and ranching area of the 1970s is not appropriate for today's mix of suburban, small urban and recreational rural areas.

The East Contra Costa region has lead the state in growth for many years. The fire services property tax rate ought to be equitable and fair to support these services at a level comparable to the rest of the county, the region and the state. It is not.

This is a community problem, one that will continue as long as the ECCFPD community tolerates it. Because of the intricacies of the implementation of 1978's Proposition 13 a state law needs to be passed to correct the unfair, discriminatory tax allocation rate. The ECCFPD community needs to come together with Assemblyman Jim Frazier and State Sen. Steven M. Glazier and begin the process of correcting this inequity.

Assemblyman Jim Frazier has offered, in a Sept. 3, 2015, letter to the editor appearing in a local paper, to draft a statute and submit it to California lawmakers. This statute needs to direct the CCC Auditor to increase the ECCFPD 8-percent tax allocation rate to bring it closer to the county's fire district average of 12 percent, and slightly reduce the tax allocation rates of the county's largest non-education organizations, such as the county and the cities of Brentwood and Oakley.

Making the shift gradually, perhaps spread over three or more years, would ease the change. The ECCFPD community needs to play an active role in this process. Area residents need to form a political action committee and reach out to legislators and fire services community leaders across the state, asking for their help in making this necessary change. To become law, this statute needs yea votes from at least 41 of the 80 members of the California Assembly and at least 21 members of the state Senate.

A campaign of this sort is not easy, and it is not a quick fix to a historical problem. It will take the community's time and money to affect the change. Let's begin at once; let's change the world.

Bryan Scott is a Brentwood resident who occasionally becomes a community affairs activist. Those interested in contributing to this community effort can reach him by email at scott.bryan@comcast.net or by telephone at 925-418-4428.

Oakley: Diablo Water District gives drought-conscious gardeners help

By Nate Gartrell ngartrell@bayareanewsgroup.com

Updated: 10/17/2015 05:54:33 PM PDT

ContraCostaTimes.com

OAKLEY -- Residents here are being asked to cut water usage by 28 percent, but that doesn't necessarily mean they'll have to let their gardens dry up.

The Diablo Water District has unveiled a new drought-tolerant garden, designed to be a blueprint for local gardeners who don't want to choose between letting their plants die and failing to conserve water. It was designed to be tailor-made for DWD ratepayers, who are restricted to watering only three days a week, DWD General Manager Mike Yeraka said.

"The idea is that we wanted to give our customers a chance to see what plants will survive on three days of watering per week," Yeraka said, adding that once plants are established, they generally require less water.

"There are actually some plants that the architect had in the plans that didn't make it on three days per week, and we said, 'OK, that's fine. We don't want to have those plants in our garden.' "

The 44 surviving species include maple trees, rosemary, Spanish lavender, Mexican feather grass, salvia, and a number of succulents.

All of them have been in the ground since June, but DWD officials did not officially unveil the garden since they wanted to be sure that the plants would survive on only three days of watering per week.

"We also landscaped the area, so our customers can pick and choose, get inspired, and see how rocks, granite, and bark can be integrated, so that they can go home and do their own garden," Yeraka said.

The Contra Costa Water District has installed a similar garden, and local fire districts have answered the call too, building gardens on their sites that feature fire-resistant plants, Yeraka said.

Anyone who visits DWD's garden can request a map of it, which includes a list of species, along with the recommended amounts of watering and minimum pot size.

The garden is located at DWD's new office building at 89 Carol Lane in Oakley.

For details, call Diablo Water District at 925-625-3798.

Contact Nate Gartrell at 925-779-7174, or follow him at [Twitter.com/nategartrell](https://twitter.com/nategartrell).



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So You Want to Be a Firefighter?

By Nick Marnell

Your captain directs you to perform a dangerous, hazardous duty, like climbing onto a burning roof. What do you say to her? To succeed as a firefighter-paramedic with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, you need to know that answer, and you need to respond quickly.

Fire Chief Stephen Healy and two recently hired firefighter-paramedics, Jeremy Kshevatzky and Chris Sillers, presented a behind the scenes look at the testing process recruits endure in their quest to become MOFD firefighter-paramedics.

"First up is the written test. It covers mechanical aptitude, mathematics, medical questions, reading comprehension. You've got to be pretty smart to get through that," said Kshevatzky. "And you've got to get smart at testing. Utilize the information the department has given you, study, and prepare."

"We also want to see how they would respond to certain firefighting situations," said Healy. "You see your captain stick into his pocket a wad of cash that he picked up from the inside of a house where a fire was just extinguished. What do you do?" Was he collecting evidence? Was he trying to protect the money from fire damage? Was he stealing it?

The chief said that most of the applicants make it to the next round: the interview with the fire board. "They ask seven or eight open-ended questions, like, why do you want this job?" he said.

"They don't want canned answers," said Kshevatzky. "They are looking for honesty. They may ask, how do you respond to a patient who has made it clear that she does not agree with paying her taxes to support the fire district? (We're here to take care of whoever is in need.)"

Successful candidates then progress to a paramedic skills evaluation. "Show us that you can function as a paramedic," said the chief.

"It's role playing," said Sillers. "A panel sits at a table, a mannequin lying on the ground, they watch how I interact. They want to see how you think in a dynamic situation. Can you make the right decisions?"

The skills evaluation is a pass-fail test. For example, the candidate responds to a victim who was hit by a car. If she does not hold the victim's head still, she fails.

Qualified applicants progress to the fire chief's interview. "It's more personal," said Kshevatzky.

"Chief Healy wanted to get to know who I was, where I came from, about my family." Sillers interviewed with previous fire chief Randy Bradley. "We spent 45 minutes talking about my life, and my family experiences," he said. Note the similarity in the interview style of the two chiefs.

The final test portion is the paramedic field evaluation. "It's the most important test we take," said Sillers. Candidates ride along in the ambulances, and are monitored on how they respond to a stroke call, a pediatric call, a diabetic with breathing difficulty. This segment may take up to two weeks.

"We want to be certain that the individual has the skill sets and the potential to be a successful, long-term district employee," said Healy. "Plus, they work at a station, spending time interacting with the crews. We try to place them with a captain they match with. Also, we provide them differing perspectives. The Orinda crews respond to freeway incidents, while those at the Moraga stations would experience calls at Saint Mary's."

"A lot of people can answer questions, but they want to know if you are someone they can work with," said Sillers.

"It was very stressful," said Kshevatzky. "I was a paramedic in another county. I had to make sure that I performed according to the protocols of this county, knowing that if I don't succeed right now, I won't be here tomorrow."

Meanwhile, the candidates undergo a physical, a psychological test and a background check.

"Through the field evaluation and the background check is where we lose the most people," said Healy.

The entire testing process took seven months, said Kshevatzky, before he received a phone call

from the chief, telling him that he was an MOFD firefighter-paramedic. "I've never felt anything like it," he said. "It was the best feeling, knowing that all of my hard work had finally paid off." The correct answer to that question in the opening paragraph? "It's our job to perform tasks that many would consider hazardous and dangerous," said Sillers. It is likely that those who choose a career as a firefighter would not have it any other way.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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Published **October 21st, 2015**

Group Demands Weil's Ouster from MOFD Board

By Nick Marnell



Fred Weil Photo Lamorinda Weekly archive

A grass roots group of district residents began a petition drive in October to force Fred Weil to resign from the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board of directors. The petition, posted on the Care2 website, states that Weil, as board president, violated the public trust in 2008 by authorizing retiring MOFD Chief Pete Nowicki's compensation beyond what his contract allowed, costing the district \$4 million in pension charges over the chief's expected 30-year retirement period. The Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association board in September stripped Nowicki of more than \$1 million of his pension when it determined that his pension had been calculated improperly.

"You will note that the petition is not for recall, only for Fred to act unilaterally in the community's best interest. The petition is really for Fred. He knows what he did," said Steve Cohn, spokesman for the Orinda Citizens' Emergency Services Task Force, sponsor of the petition. "This is not right and there should be repercussions." The task force notes that since Weil's term ends in

November 2016, a recall would not be worth the effort and expense. Rather, the group encourages Weil to remove himself from the board immediately "so as to allow the board and the community to move on without distractions."

"As long as he remains a voting member of the MOFD board, his judgment will be questioned," reads the petition. "If the other members of the (2008) board were still public officials, they would be included. But they are not," said Cohn.

"The petition is part of Steve Cohn's malicious smear campaign, motivated, I believe, by a desire for revenge," said Weil. "He has resented for years my willingness to publicly challenge his dubious proposals, including his latest attempt to derail the rebuilding of Orinda's fire station 43 on Via Las Cruces, (which is a station) so important to the safety of north Orinda."

Cohn wrote to Supervisor Candace Andersen in October blaming MOFD and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District for costing the districts millions of dollars by halting plans to build and operate joint fire station 46 in western Lafayette, and asking her to intercede. MOFD opted to rebuild station 43 and ConFire chose to repair Lafayette station 16. "I was in favor of station 46, but the situation has changed," said Andersen. "The important thing is that Lafayette and Orinda will have excellent coverage."

"Cohn has used as a vehicle for his personal attack the written and oral statements of CCCERA's lawyer, Harvey Leiderman," continued Weil. He explained that in August, Leiderman wrote a memorandum to CCCERA laying much of the blame on the MOFD board for Nowicki's improper pension, failing to mention that Leiderman warned CCCERA in 2009 that the practices and policies of the retirement board for more than 10 years had caused overpayments to retirees, including many of the items that Leiderman claimed were caused by the misconduct of the MOFD board or Nowicki. "Cohn knows all about Leiderman's 2009 letter, but he is hiding that fact in his petition," said Weil.

Weil asserted that Leiderman's suggestion that the MOFD board violated the Brown Act in

working out Nowicki's pension was baseless and gratuitous, yet Weil said that Cohn continues to create the impression that Weil violated the Brown Act.

"This is not personal between me and Fred; I don't even know him personally," said Cohn. "This is about something he and the 2008 board did ... which has damaged the community by handing out millions of dollars to a favored public employee."

In its 18-year history, several directors have resigned from the MOFD board, the latest being Frank Sperling, who moved out of the district in 2013. No board member ever resigned in response to public pressure.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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Bay Point, Pittsburg: Ambrose Park pool plans up for approval

By Sam Richards

srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com

Posted: **10/23/2015** 11:06:26 AM PDT Updated: 3 days ago

PITTSBURG -- The return of swimming to Ambrose Park may take a big step closer Tuesday night with a key Planning Commission approval.

And with most of the needed \$2.3 million in hand, the aquatic center could be open for Independence Day 2016.

It's been a long time coming. The struggle to replace the closed facility has taken six years and weathered three separate pool designs. The plan had serious funding shortages until recently.

"I think this is the closest we've been, to tell you the truth," said Doug Long, general manager of the Ambrose Recreation and Park District. "If it all goes right, kids should be splashing around over there on July 4."

The planning commission is set to decide whether to approve the latest renovation plans for the Ambrose Aquatic Center, which has been closed since 2009. This will be the third time the pool project has come before the commission, and the latest plan reflects major changes in scope, generally made to reflect shrinking budgets. Planning staff recommends approval, and if the commission follows suit, it should be the last planning hurdle for the pool.

"They will not need any other design approval from the city," said city Associate Planner Jordan Davis.

Ambrose Park was annexed by the City of Pittsburg in September 2008, and it's the only one of the district's nine parks outside unincorporated Bay Point. Though Pittsburg doesn't have operational control over the park, the city has the authority to review and approve the design of proposed structures and features there, Davis said, including the pool.

The pool renovation was first laid out in the 2009 Ambrose Park Master Plan. The plan included options for a brand new pool and for renovating the existing one; several public meetings later, the option to renovate the old pool was chosen.

As part of the project's latest incarnation, the new pool would be about two-thirds the size of the old one. The existing bathhouse building would be replaced by a prefabricated building, and many of the existing concrete areas would be replaced with grass.

Earlier this year, facing a potential \$300,000 funding shortfall, Long said that seeking donations from local industries and businesses was a distinct possibility. But with a combination of general belt tightening in the district, including contracting out some maintenance functions, and higher property tax revenues from an improved economy, that gap is projected now to be closer to \$63,000.

Eduardo Torres of the community group West Pittsburg for Progress said he has little reason to believe this newest proposal is any more likely to move forward than the ones before it. He said the park district board should have been spending more time in recent months to drum up funding for the project.

"Last year, they said the pool would be open by Memorial Day weekend; now they're saying July of next year," Torres said. "A lot of people in our community have already lost faith in this project Until I see real progress, I'm going to continue to be cautiously optimistic about the pool project."

Pittsburg Planning Commission

When: Tuesday, Oct. 27, 7-9 p.m. Where: Council Chambers, 65 Civic Ave., Pittsburg
Information: www.ci.pittsburg.ca.us, click on "agenda and minutes"

Worst of East Contra Costa island fire appears over

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

Posted: **10/23/2015** 11:00:00 PM PDT Updated: a day ago

BRADFORD ISLAND -- The worst of a fire that spread through this island in the Sacramento/San Joaquin River Delta appeared to be over Saturday.

"I'm feeling much better," said Robert Davies, a property owner who also is a member of the board of trustees of Bradford Island Reclamation District 2059.

"The fire was burning the entire night last night and all (this) morning," he said Saturday afternoon. "Right now I'm looking at a bunch of smoke."

As of 6 p.m. there were still some flames on the west side of the island, Davies said.

The fire began around 1:30 p.m. Friday and quickly spread, burning at least one building by late afternoon, he said.

"Thank God for the sheriff," Davies said. A Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office helicopter doused flames from 3 p.m. until darkness Friday with water from a 300-gallon bucket, Davies explained. The helicopter crew dropped the bucket into a lake on the island for refills so many times, he lost count, he said.

"If the sheriff's department didn't come forward with the bucket, we would have had a major problem," he added.

The cash-strapped East Contra Costa Fire Protection District stopped serving Bradford Island and other nearby areas of easternmost Contra Costa several years ago.

"My sons and I did fire watch the entire night," Davies said. "It came within 200 yards of my RV." His younger son, Chris Davies, was on duty Saturday with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, where he is an engineer, his father said, leaving the elder Davies and his older son, who is 35, to keep an eye on the island blaze.

District Secretary Angelia Tant, in an email to Bradford Island landowners Saturday, said 12 power poles burned on the side of the island near the Davies property and another two on the north end.

The island counts about a dozen residents. Additionally, there are landowners, like Davies, who own property on Bradford Island but live off the island.

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

Contra Costa Times editorial: Police stop of Kensington official doesn't pass the smell test

Contra Costa Times editorial © 2015 Bay Area News Group
Posted: 10/24/2015 04:00:00 PM PDT Updated: 78 min. ago



Kensington Police Department Officer Keith Barrow mingles with friends and colleagues during the Richmond Elks Lodge's 10th annual Police Officer Appreciation Awards Night in El Sobrante, Calif., on Wednesday, February 11, 2009. (Kristopher Skinner/Staff archives)

In what universe is this OK?

Two cops outside their community in a neighboring city pull over an elected official, refuse to tell her why she's been stopped, threaten her with arrest when she asks questions, detain her for about a half-hour and ticket her.

Not even in Kensington should this be acceptable. But it's not surprising given the town governing board's history of conducting public business in secret, stonewalling inquiries and filing lawsuits against residents who object.

The culture must change. We keep waiting and wondering when the well-educated residents of Kensington, an enclave of 5,000 nestled between Berkeley, Albany and El Cerrito, will wake up and take back control of their town.

That doesn't mean a revolution. That means politically organizing and fielding qualified candidates to unseat the board majority, two of whom are up for re-election next year.

As for the latest incident, police Chief Kevin Hart has wisely farmed out the internal investigation to the Richmond Police Department. He's also asked the district attorney to conduct a review. And, by the way, the FBI is poking around.

Hart asks that the community not prejudge what happened. Unfortunately, from what we know so far, this doesn't pass the smell test. And if wrongdoing is found, the community should demand action.

Vanessa Cordova is the official who was pulled over. She was elected last year to the board of the Kensington Police Protection and Community Services District and is one of two board members who have tried to change its culture.

She has complained about board secrecy, what she called, with justification, "an oligarchy sustained by obfuscation." And she led efforts to fire former police Chief Greg Harman earlier this year for his lax handling of an internal investigation of Sgt. Keith Barrow.

Which brings us to Barrow. He is the leader of the police union, which has been embroiled in negotiations with the district board for over a year. He is also the cop who had his gun, badge, handcuffs and two clips of ammunition stolen when he fell asleep while with a prostitute in Reno. He was disciplined with only a suspension.

Barrow was one of the two cops who stopped Cordova earlier this month in Berkeley, more than a mile from Kensington. Cordova was ultimately cited for an expired car registration and missing a front license plate.

What were the two cops doing there? How is it that they pulled over, of all people, a board member? Coincidence? Hard to believe.

If these cops were trying to send a message, it's time for the community to send one back.

Pittsburg: Annexation of Kirker Pass land for homes on tap

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

Posted: 10/30/2015 07:07:45 PM PDT Updated: 3 days ago

PITTSBURG -- The City Council on Monday night is set to start the process of annexing land south of the city along Kirker Pass Road where a proposed 356-house subdivision would be built.

The council will also have to rezone the land, which is already within the city's sphere of influence and inside its urban limit line. The urban boundary was narrowly approved by voters in 2005 as Measure P, which was backed by the Seeno construction company that wants to build the Montreaux subdivision. That vote thus opened up 2,200 acres in the hills southwest of the city for development and future annexation into Pittsburg.

The Montreaux development is proposed by builder Altec Homes., affiliated with Concord-based Seecon Financial. It would comprise large, estate-size homes on 77 acres. Seventy-one acres would be preserved as open space; another 17 acres would become a stormwater collection basin.

The property would be rezoned from hillside planned development to single family residential, which would double the number of houses that would be allowed there.

A long-planned 2-mile western extension of James Donlan Boulevard from Antioch would one day connect with Kirker Pass Road near where the new homes would be built, according to Pittsburg city staff reports.

The housing development would also have to come under the jurisdictions of Delta Diablo, the local sanitation district, and the Contra Costa Water District.

This plan has been working its way through Pittsburg's approval process since April 2010. Some groups, notably Save Mount Diablo, have criticized the project for the massive grading in the hills it would require, and indeed the project's environmental report says that grading is a "significant unavoidable impact."

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

Pittsburg City Council When: Monday, Nov. 2, 7 p.m.

Where: Pittsburg City Hall, 65 Civic Ave., Pittsburg

Information: www.ci.pittsburg.ca.us, then click on "agendas and minutes"

Pinole City Councilman Phil Green dies

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

Posted: 10/30/2015 07:24:06 AM PDT Updated: about 6 hours ago



Pinole City Councilman Phil Green has died. (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group)

PINOLE -- Pinole City Councilman Phil Green, who announced in September that he had cancer, died Oct. 23.

Green's death was announced by Hercules Mayor Sherry McCoy at the end of Tuesday's Hercules City Council meeting, which was adjourned in Green's memory.

News of his passing was also acknowledged Thursday with the posting of the Oct. 30 Pinole city manager's weekly administrative report.

A city official said that services will be private.

Green hosted a celebration of life and friendship for friends and community members at the Richmond Country Club on Sept. 13.

Green was the sole owner of PDF, a small business that sold and serviced fire extinguishers and other fire equipment.

He had served on the Pinole City Council since 2010. He also served one term on the council from 1986 to 1990.

More recently, he had served on several regional committees, including as delegate to the Western Contra Costa Transit Authority board and as alternate on the West Contra Costa Unified School District Bond Oversight Committee and alternate delegate to the Association of Bay Area Governments, according to the city manager's report.

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

Rodeo Hercules Fire District may close station after suit deal

By [Matthew Artz martz@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:martz@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Posted: 10/30/2015 07:22:21 AM PDT Updated: about 6 hours ago

HERCULES -- The Rodeo Hercules Fire District has settled a closely watched lawsuit, agreeing to rescind a property assessment in 2017 that had been billed as safeguarding its finances for years to come.

The fire district, which may have to once again close one of its two stations after the assessment expires, also agreed to pay \$175,000 in attorney's fees for the plaintiff Thomas Pearson and not seek another benefit assessment for three years.

The lawsuit had attracted attention outside the small cash-strapped district because it challenged whether fire districts were eligible to seek benefit assessments, which only need a simple majority for passage rather than the two-thirds majority required for a standard property tax hike.

Pearson's lawsuit argued that the district's assessment, approved last year by a vote of property owners, was invalid because it paid for services that had been provided for years rather than new benefits.

The settlement leaves the larger legal question unsettled, but Pearson, 67, of Hercules, said he was happy with it.

"I felt the board was simply trying to do an end around on the voters because it's much easier to get 50 percent plus one," he said. "I thought it was illegal. And I wanted to send a message to the board to knock it off."

Chief Charles Hanley said the settlement was "a business decision" for the district, which now must consider whether to seek a property tax hike to restore the estimated \$940,000 per year that the assessment raised. That money had been used to help reopen its Rodeo station, which Hanley said is now likely to close again at the end of 2017.

"We'll basically regroup," Hanley said. "We have some money in our reserves and now we can figure out what the next move is."

The district has been in financial straits for years as its tax base shrunk and pension obligations increased.

"This is the worst position I've seen the district in," said veteran board member Bill Prather, who nevertheless had opposed the benefit assessment. "It was phony from day one. Everybody knew that."

The assessment charged single-family homeowners \$82 per year. Condo owners paid \$46.93. Rates varied for commercial properties with Phillips 66, the district's largest property owner, paying about \$45,500 for its 29 parcels.

Contact Matthew Artz at 510-208-6435.

East Contra Costa Fire District wants to reopen fourth station, seek another tax measure

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

Posted: **11/02/2015** 10:37:31 PM PST Updated: about 19 hours ago



East Contra Costa firefighter Capt. Robert Ruddick, of Station 52, examines the outside their fire truck after performing a regular maintenance checkup at the fire station in Brentwood, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 28, 2015. Over the past decade, the number of fire stations operated by the East County Fire District has dropped from eight to three. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group) (JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO)

OAKLEY -- In a push to solve the agency's long-standing financial troubles, directors of the East Contra Costa Fire District agreed Monday to the idea of reopening a fourth station next year as well as proposing another tax measure.

In a split vote, board members accepted these recommendations from a multi-jurisdictional task force that has spent nearly the past 4½ months brainstorming both temporary fixes and long-term solutions to the district's crippling shortage of firefighters and the stations to house them.

"We have a broken system," said Brentwood City Manager Gus Vina, who established the 10-member group that represents Brentwood, Oakley and the county as well as firefighters themselves.



East Contra Costa firefighter captain Robert Ruddick, of Station 52, lowers the fire truck cab after performing a regular maintenance checkup at the fire station in Brentwood, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 28, 2015. Over the past decade, the number of fire stations operated by the East County Fire District has dropped from eight to three. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group) (JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO)

Before East Contra Costa Fire can act on the task force's advice, however, those other agencies also must give their approval because the plan calls for each of them to contribute one-time funds to keep the additional fire station open and fully staffed for 18 months while the board continues looking for a long-term source of revenue.

The estimated cost of reopening one of the five stations the district has been forced to mothball over as many years and recruiting more firefighters is \$2.2 million, which would keep it functioning from January through June 2017.

East Contra Costa Fire would pay the lion's share, but Brentwood and Oakley would contribute \$666,000 and \$382,202, respectively; the county's portion would be \$311,617.

Over the next several weeks, the task force will present its recommendations to the two city councils as well as the county board of Supervisors; if there is consensus, East Contra Costa Fire directors will vote again at their Dec. 7 meeting to act on the plan.

Several on the fire board emphasized the need to get going quickly, noting that the district already is lagging given the time it takes to put some kind of revenue-generating measure to voters next year.

"There's too much at risk here," said Director Ronald Johansen, who predicted that area residents' home insurance premiums soon will be going up significantly because the district is having trouble meeting industry standards for staffing and response times.

In a second vote, the board unanimously agreed to hire a consulting firm to update the fire district's master plan, completed in 2006, for a maximum fee of \$64,000. The document will analyze whether East Contra Costa Fire is operating as efficiently as it could and what it will take to meet demands for service as the region's population -- now estimated at 110,000 -- expands.

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Print this page

Published **November 4th, 2015**

Opposing Forces Unite Against MOFD Station 43

By *Nick Marnell*

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District took the first official step in the reconstruction of station 43 Oct. 21 by authorizing Fire Chief Stephen Healy to spend over \$200,000 on document reviews and updates and to purchase and install a mobile home to serve as a temporary fire station. Director Steve Anderson voted against the authorization, and he was joined by an unlikely ally in the firefighters union.

"I don't want the district to start and then stop," said Healy. "If we're going forward with the rebuilding of the fire station and the purchase of a mobile home, authorize me to do it now. I will not purchase anything until the board has seen a total cost estimate."

The chief said that the district will require a double-wide mobile home as the temporary station, which has to be purchased and cannot be rented. The home will have some salvage value, said Healy, "Something more than worthless, but less than \$95,000." Tentative plans call for the placement of the temporary station in the St. Stephen's Church parking lot.

"For the taxpayers and residents of MOFD, station 46 was an outstanding opportunity," said Anderson. The joint venture with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District to build and operate a station in western Lafayette was estimated to save each district more than \$1 million annually in expenses.

"Once we go down the 43 road, it removes any opportunity for MOFD and ConFire to collaborate on a joint station," continued Anderson. "And it removes leverage for ConFire to do what they say they're going to do." ConFire Chief Jeff Carman presented a plan to his board to rebuild station 16 in Lafayette but he has not yet received official approval. If station 16 remains closed, emergency calls in that area will most likely continue to be handled through an automatic aid agreement with MOFD.

"I received unanimous support from our board for reopening station 16 and to report back when we have received a final proposal," said Carman. "We are forging ahead with those same plans we presented to our board."

Mark DeWeese, the district union representative, asked the board to put the station 43 reconstruction temporarily on hold. He appealed from a different perspective than Anderson, the only board member to vote against the current labor contract, fearful of the automatic wage increases it earmarked.

"The financial challenges in recent years have been addressed through salary and benefit restrictions and reductions on current Local 1230 employees," said DeWeese. "Now that the financial picture is looking positive, restoring these salaries and benefits should be the first thing this board addresses, not excessive capital spending on rebuilding station 43.

"It's not expensive buildings that put out the fires and deliver the high quality emergency medical response that MOFD is known for, it's high quality people."

The motion to authorize Healy to commence the station 43 project passed 3-1, with director Kathleen Famulener absent. Representatives of investment bank Brandis Tallman plan to address the board Nov. 18 on financing options for the primary building construction.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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Calaveras Enterprise

County provides financial assistance to fire districts

- By Sonia Waraich sonia@calaverasenterprise.com
- Nov 6, 2015

The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously on Tuesday to lend fire districts that responded to the Butte Fire 100 percent of their potential tax revenue a month early through an emergency modification of the Teeter Plan.

The Teeter Plan, a county savings account that accumulates penalties paid on late tax payments, currently provides cash advances equal to 55 percent of tax apportionments through December and 40 percent through April to agencies that bank with the county treasury and collect taxes.

Because of the amount of money spent on fire-suppression and related activities, harder-hit fire districts have already used up their loans and need funds to get through November until the next apportionment is due in December.

Jeff Stone, chief of the Central Calaveras Fire and Rescue Protection District, said his district was hit hard by the fire and its single largest expense is paying the firefighters for 21 straight days of being on duty.

Stone added that the district also provided about 500 gallons of diesel fuel to local law enforcement to help with evacuation efforts and their backup generators, which run on propane, were also continually running for several weeks.

He said the vendors for these supplies and services wanted to be paid immediately, which the district has done.

“We used our reserve funds to pay these return costs on the expectation that we’d receive reimbursement,” Stone said.

The fire districts are expected to be reimbursed for all expenditures related to the disaster once emergency funds materialize, but the process for special districts to receive disaster relief can take half a year.

“In the meantime we have a cash-flow issue for operations,” Rebecca Callen, the county’s auditor-controller, told the board.

Of the roughly \$7 million in the Teeter fund, Central Calaveras Fire was allotted \$137,939.36, of which \$75,866.65 (55 percent) has already been spent with \$55,175.74 (40 percent) still to come. Loans are expected to be repaid by June 30, 2016.

Because fire districts are separate entities and are not governed by the county's board of supervisors, the money the county received for disaster relief cannot be directed to those districts and thus they must apply separately for public assistance.

"There's a mechanism in place for us to get an advance," Callen said. "There wasn't and there isn't a mechanism for them to get an advance."

But Mike Johnson, chief of Ebbetts Pass Fire Protection District, told the board that "the fire districts in this county have been heading for trouble since the economy dumped."

"What's happening here is good," Johnson said, "but we will come to a point where nobody has any money."

Though Ebbetts Pass Fire was not as impacted by the fire and has more tax revenue than other districts, Johnson said the board should expect to hear from them again unless things change.

Stone said the long-term effects of the fire on property values will mean the projected budgets for the county and all special districts will have to be reduced with yet-to-be-determined consequences.

If a fire district was unable to continue operating, the state's safety requirements would require the Local Agency Formation Commission of Calaveras County to get involved and get another local district to cover that area, which would have to be voted on by the public.

In the past, Callen said districts that weren't viable for certain communities, such as the veteran and cemetery districts, were consolidated with other districts instead of dissolved entirely.

Bay Area needs powerful regional government, study says

Updated: 11/06/2015 03:04:30 PM PST

ContraCostaTimes.com

The Bay Area generates one of the brightest sparks in the nation's recovering economy, but feeding its vitality means residents will have to give up some local control, dig deeper into their wallets, and make room for tens of thousands of new neighbors, according to study released Friday.

Keeping on prosperity's path requires a regional government with power to overcome local obstacles, money from new taxes and tolls, and opening the doors to housing closed by local growth controls and state environmental red tape, according to "A Roadmap for Economic Resilience," an in-depth study done by the Bay Area Council Economic Institute.

Without action, the Bay Area's highways choked with commuters, its fragmented transit systems, and anti-growth attitudes will choke the boom times, the report says.

The Bay Area may have 101 cities, "but it is one economy with more than 7 million people," says Bay Area Council President Jim Wunderman.

"No city can perceive itself as an island. It's time for policymakers and business leaders to think and act with a regional perspective ... to maximize our many assets and keep the economy growing," he says.

The Bay Area Council is a business-sponsored public policy advocacy group.

A key concept is the creation of a powerful regional government -- "a regional planning, finance and management" agency -- funded by tolls on bridges, highways and express lanes and a regional sales tax, gas tax, or vehicle license fee.

According to the study, the regional agency would develop "a stronger regional approach to addressing critical needs (of) infrastructure, housing, workforce training, and economic development."

(Late last month, an attempt to expand one regional agency's powers in this direction resulted in a pact to study merging the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the Association of Bay Area Governments.)

Loss of local control, a new layer of government and more taxes are warning words for groups that monitor taxpayer burdens.

"Why do they need additional revenue?" asked Jon Coupal of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Foundation. "If some functions shift to a regional government, shouldn't the revenue stream follow?"

"California remains a very, very overtaxed state," he said. "It has the highest sales tax and highest gas tax ... and a great deal of mismanaged tax revenue."

Tax increases might result in improvements, but much of the money will go to fund public employee pensions, he predicted.

But he also sees a need to protect the area's economy. "Most of the major chip manufacturers have left California," he said. "A lot of high tech is moving to Denver and Salt Lake City, and a lot of biotech is moving to Salt Lake." Housing, a key to developing the workforce and easing commute strains, is in crisis:

There's too little of it and it costs too much, the report finds. The Bay Area needs nearly 1.3 million housing units built by 2040 to meet demand, and there should be consequences when cities fail to meet state-mandated housing goals, such as loss of local authority to approve housing, the report advises.

The plan includes the long-sought goal of easing environmental protection laws that hinder speedy construction or block building entirely.

"It shouldn't be read as the region vs. cities," said report co-author Micah Weinberg, a council senior policy adviser. "It should be 'How can we make it easier for cities to do the right thing by residents of the region?'"

Reducing construction costs would be packaged with quicker approvals for lower-cost construction and new building technologies, and capping fees throughout the region.

Coupal called the state's building permits and mandates absurd.

The housing crisis is a "self-inflicted wound," he said. The report does not consider actions suggested by other factions in the Bay Area's growth debates, such as making businesses that rely on commuters help pay for their transportation and housing needs.

That's a nonstarter for Weinberg and Wunderman.

"When you start to pick off individual businesses, it does not scale," Weinberg said. "You need the scale of a state or region to make the investment you need in transportation."

Wunderman said the world economy is too dynamic to risk the Bay Area's momentum.

"If you have jobs, you can solve problems. ... The last thing you want to do is put the brakes on the economy."

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Economic resilience

"A Roadmap for Economic Resilience" sets six actions needed to sustain the Bay Area's economic growth and to prepare it for natural disasters.

- Create a regional infrastructure financing authority with the power to play a stronger role in regional transportation finance and planning.
- Give the regional authority enhanced power to acquire funding.
- Coordinate the building of large-scale water recycling, desalination, and storage infrastructure through a regional entity.
- Lower the voter threshold for county infrastructure taxes to 55 percent.
- Establish a separate environmental review process for infrastructure.
- Plan for resiliency in all infrastructure decisions (to prepare for and react to natural disasters)

The full report is online at www.bayareaeconomy.org

The Sacramento Bee

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Southern California deal for Delta islands could cost up to \$240 million

Metropolitan would team with Kern County agencies on land purchase

Delta islands could be useful in water transfers, storage

Environmentalists warn of south state water grab

By Dale Kasler and Ryan Sabalow

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Southern California's most powerful water agency is inching closer toward spending as much as \$240 million to buy a cluster of islands in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, a move that has stirred accusations of a south-state water grab.

The board of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California voted Tuesday to authorize its general manager to negotiate options on the five islands, owned by a company called Delta Wetlands Properties. It would mark the first time Metropolitan has purchased land in the Delta, which serves as the hub of California's complicated man-made water-delivery network.

The price is still under negotiation but, based on prevailing Delta land values, could be between \$7,500 to \$12,000 an acre, said Metropolitan general manager Jeff Kightlinger. That would put the total price for the 80,000-acre purchase at somewhere between \$150 million and \$240 million.

Metropolitan and [three agricultural water agencies](#) from Kern County – Semitropic, Rosedale-Rio Bravo and Wheeler Ridge-Maricopa – have been discussing purchasing the five islands for several weeks.

In his first extensive comments on the Delta land plan since it surfaced weeks ago, Kightlinger told reporters that Metropolitan is waiting for the boards of the Kern agencies to authorize the purchase options.

Critics have said Metropolitan and its partners want to use the lands to somehow pull more water out of the Delta. Kightlinger and Stephen Arakawa, Metropolitan's director of Bay-Delta Initiatives, acknowledged that more water is Metropolitan's goal, but not in the way the agency's opponents think. Instead, Metropolitan's plan is to restore wildlife habitats on the islands, on the theory that any project that enhances the Delta's various ecosystems will smooth the way for improved water deliveries.

“Our interest is reliable (water) supply, and a health environment in the Delta is a key part of that,” Arakawa said. “You can’t have a reliable supply without a healthy environment.”

Kightlinger said ownership of the islands could help Metropolitan and its allies push ahead with the Delta tunnels project, known as California WaterFix, a controversial \$16 billion plan spearheaded by Gov. Jerry Brown to re-engineer the Delta and enhance reliability of water deliveries to Metropolitan and San Joaquin Valley agricultural water agencies.

Two of the islands to be purchased sit along the proposed tunnels route, and owning them would mean fewer eminent-domain proceedings to get the tunnels project going, Kightlinger said. He added that the islands could also be used to store dirt as excavation proceeds for the tunnels.

Delta Wetlands Properties’ owner, the U.S. subsidiary of Zurich Insurance Group, has been trying for 20 years to convert the islands into reservoirs as a means of storing additional water for customers south of the Delta. Kightlinger said, “we’ve never been sold on them as reservoir sites,” but he said there may be some value in using the islands for water storage.

The islands sit below sea level and could store up to 70 billion gallons of water during wet years.

Officials with Delta Wetlands couldn’t be reached for comment Tuesday.

The purchase would include Bouldin Island, Bacon Island, Webb Tract, most of Holland Island and a portion of tiny Chipps Island, a total of more than 20,000 acres.

Both the reservoir plan and Brown’s California WaterFix have been criticized by Delta farmers and environmentalists. Many in the Delta agricultural community have said Metropolitan and its partners could use the Delta islands to engineer a major water grab.

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Read more here: <http://www.sacbee.com/news/state/california/water-and-drought/article44155962.html#storylink=cpy>

East Contra Costa fire district moves closer to solving financial woes

By Nate Gartrell ngartrell@bayareanewsgroup.com

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ContraCostaTimes.com

BRENTWOOD -- The struggling East Contra Costa Fire District is one step closer to getting badly needed financial relief.

On Tuesday, the city councils of Brentwood and Oakley each unanimously approved a set of recommendations sent to them by a task force created to come up with short- and long-term solutions to the ECCFPD's ongoing financial crisis. In May, the district closed two of its fire stations after a parcel tax ballot initiative that would have generated \$21 million over five years was rejected by voters.

The recommendations still need to be approved by the Contra Costa County board of supervisors on Tuesday, and then the ECCFPD board on Dec. 7 before they'll take effect. They include reopening a fully staffed fourth station for 18 months, which is estimated to cost \$2.2 million, according to a city staff report. Those costs will be split between the ECCFPD, the county, and the cities of Brentwood and Oakley.

Also, the task force recommended that the district consider another ballot initiative to fund the ECCFPD. It's not clear whether this will mean another parcel tax assessment, like the one voters rejected earlier this year, or a different means of acquiring revenue.

Additionally, officials will be exploring other ways to create a long-term solution to the problem.

"We have a common crisis and it's going to take all of us, all working together, to come up with the right solution," Brentwood City Manager Gus Vina said.

In April, when voters rejected the parcel assessment ballot measure, 73 percent of the 43,684 ballots went unreturned, according to district documents. Of those, there were only two East Contra Costa communities in which a majority voted in favor of the tax: Brentwood, and Marsh Creek.

Before the Brentwood council approved the recommendations, district Chief Hugh Henderson described to the council incidents in which his firefighters were spread so thin that they were unable to respond to other emergencies in progress. In one, a Discovery Bay structure fire that caused roughly \$500,000 in damages, more than a half-dozen medical emergencies occurred during the seven hours firefighters were battling the house fire.

"The current staffing model cannot provide service levels or meet the needs of the community," Henderson said, asking the council to approve the recommendations.

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