

Brentwood invests in projects to promote agritourism, wine region



Families transport ladders as they search for the right tree to pick cherries while at Mike's U-Pick in Brentwood, Calif., on Sunday, May 27, 2018. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

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BRENTWOOD — The City Council this week agreed to invest in the Brentwood Agricultural Business Program, seeking a winegrowers' appellation status and exploring a pilot project to bring trolleys to transport visitors to and from the popular U-Pick farms.

The Brentwood Agricultural Business Program is an umbrella for a variety of projects, including those of a local winegrowers group and Harvest Time, a group of farmers that promotes Brentwood-area agritourism, city senior analyst Peggy Berglund said. All of the projects are geared toward improving regional marketing and branding of agriculture and its benefits to the region, she said.

Approved unanimously, all of the projects were developed over the last 10 months as part of the city's strategic goal to find ways to maintain and enhance Brentwood's quality of life and develop a diverse economy. The city's agricultural enterprise committee vetted the projects, which will cost almost \$53,000, before bringing them to council, Mayor Bob Taylor said.

As part of the branding effort, the Contra Costa Winegrowers Association had requested \$17,000 to gather information as a first step toward becoming part of the Central Coast Appellation region or starting its own region to establish an identity for its grapes and wine. The accreditation that comes with such a study allows the region to be recognized as part of the federal registry of approved American Viticultural Areas.

“An agricultural viticultural area has several benefits,” Berglund said. “Potentially, there would be higher grape prices, wine prices, and a greater opportunity to market and sell grapes and wine.”

Other economic benefits to the region include bringing a better consumer awareness of winegrowing in the region and establish a unique identity for the grapes and wine in the region.

“There’s that multiplier effect,” she said. “This will help hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, shops and restaurants.”

The appellation would be beneficial, Mayor Bob Taylor said.

“I see it as an asset for the wine region,” he said.

Peter Petersen of Petersen Vineyards in Knightsen and Winegrowers Association director said he favored the move.

“It would have a big impact on our area,” he said. “It’s not only that it affects us in regards to price. . . . We are actually today limited . . . we will not be able to sell to wineries these grapes due to the fact that we are not part of an AVA.”

The Harvest Time proposals, meanwhile, include \$6,110 to reconstruct its website and include a feature allowing members to update their farm hours and product availability in real time, as well as offer customers ways to quickly find information regarding the local farm stands. Also included is a \$9,600 proposal to enhance the use of social media over a two-year period.

“This is an opportunity for customers to speak directly to Harvest Time and see what is open,” Berglund said. “This will provide a more organized and enjoyable experience for customers.”

The council also approved the group’s request for \$19,000 to create and install directional signs to help tourists — especially U-Pick customers — when visiting the area. The group plans to install more than 200 new signs on 25 poles in and around Brentwood.

“This will help keep traffic moving moving — hopefully in the proper direction — and bring a very cohesive look to our area and show that we are an agricultural destination,” Berglund said.

The council also agreed to launch a study of a Trolley Pilot Program that would bring free trolleys to guide visitors to area farm stands. The city estimates that every year during the U-Pick season, between 180,000 to 200,000 visitors come to the area to pick fresh fruits and vegetables

at the local farms. A trolley could help relieve parking and traffic issues as well as help connect visitors with other local businesses, they said.

The proposal calls for soliciting potential operators to explore the costs and feasibility of the trolleys, which would also offer opportunities for local businesses to advertise. The cost is yet to be determined.

The final project calls for a study of an expanded Farm to Fork program, which promotes serving local food at area businesses.

“We would look at other cities for best practices and bringing them to our community and weaving them into our community,” Berglund said. “Restaurants and anyone whose contributing to the ag community would be bound with us (the city) — restaurants, wineries, tasting rooms, distilleries. We would have cooking classes, tours and an educational program.”

In considering the costs of the four projects, Vice Mayor Joel Bryant indicated they were minimal.

“Basically, you are going to be investing the princely sum of about 2 cents per visitor to the area, and I assure you they spend substantially more than 2 cents per visitor when they are here,” he said.

“Brentwood has always been an agricultural destination,” he added. “Our farmers, our growers were the original attraction. There are a large amount of families that now have roots in the communities that would not have been aware Brentwood existed if it had not been for coming out here and taking advantage of the ag we have around here ...”

East Bay Times

California fires: Why there will be more disasters like Paradise



PARADISE, CA – NOVEMBER 15: Aerial footage shows homes destroyed by the Camp Fire near the Paradise Plaza off Clark Road in Paradise, California, on Thursday, November 15, 2018. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

By [Paul Rogers](#) | progers@bayareanewsgroup.com |

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Fire crews are still working to contain the deadly inferno that leveled the town of Paradise, virtually wiping it off the map. Thousands of people are homeless, living in tents, trailers and parking lots. Dozens are dead. Hundreds are still missing. And massive, choking plumes of smoke continue to blanket Northern California.

Forecasters say rain might arrive by Thanksgiving to clear away the smoke and mercifully reduce fire danger. But the optimism is tempered by a grim reality. Scientists say as temperatures continue to warm, drying out brush, grasses and trees into explosively flammable fuel by late summer and autumn, catastrophic fires and the unhealthy smoke they spew hundreds of miles away will almost certainly become more frequent in California and across the West in the coming years.

“Climate change is not the cause of these fires,” said Park Williams, a climate scientist at Columbia University’s Lamont–Doherty Earth Observatory in New York. “But the warmer atmosphere is causing most fires to be harder to contain. They are burning bigger and hotter.”

The numbers are stark. California has warmed roughly 3 degrees Fahrenheit since 1980 during the autumn months of September, October and November. Rainfall in those months has fallen by about one-third over the same time. And the result has been a state increasingly on fire.

From 1980 to 1990, roughly 300,000 to 400,000 acres a year burned in California. Last year, 1.4 million acres burned. This year, so far, 1.8 million acres — an area six times the city of Los Angeles — of federal, state and private land has been incinerated. Similar trends are afoot in other Western states.

“We don’t even say ‘fire season’ any more. It’s year round,” said Scott McLean, deputy chief of Cal Fire, the state’s primary firefighting agency. “The climate change we are dealing with is related to that.”



Firefighters battle flames in the Oak Forest Mobile Estates area of Westlake Village last week. Many homes were destroyed in the complex as the Woolsey Fire continued to burn towards the coast in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. (photo by Andy Holzman)

Put another way, [15 of the 20 largest fires in California history have occurred since 2000](#). Four of the five largest have happened since 2012. And the two all-time biggest in terms of acres burned — the Mendocino Complex Fire centered in Lake County this summer and the Thomas Fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties last December — both happened in the last 12 months.

“We’re in a new abnormal,” a grim Gov. Jerry Brown said last Sunday at a news conference to discuss the Paradise disaster. “Things like this will be part of our future. Things like this and worse.”

Even Ryan Zinke, Interior Secretary in the Trump administration, which has been skeptical, if not hostile, of climate science, conceded the changing conditions on Wednesday during a visit to Paradise.

Zinke said he did not “want to finger point” and said there were multiple reasons for the worsening fires. But those include the fact that “fire seasons have gotten longer and the temperatures have gotten hotter,” Zinke said.

The climate is warming because burning fossil fuels traps heat in the atmosphere. The 10 hottest years on Earth since modern temperature records began in 1880 all have occurred since 1998, according to NASA and NOAA. But climate change is not the only reason for the growth in wildfires, scientists and firefighters say.

Centuries ago, lightning and Native Americans clearing land burned more acres a year than are burning now in California. But those fires were mostly low-intensity affairs, helping clear dead underbrush. Today, because fire crews have put out blazes for generations, many forests have so much dead and living vegetation that they often explode out of control, wiping out large trees and seeds.

More than a century ago, it was not uncommon for whole towns to burn down. The 1871 Peshtigo Fire killed about 1,500 people in Wisconsin and Michigan, with so many fatalities that there weren’t enough survivors in some communities to identify the dead. The Great Fire of 1910 burned 3 million acres in Washington, Idaho and Montana, killing 86 and sending smoke plumes to New York. Afterward, the U.S. Forest Service set a policy of putting out fires by 10 a.m. the next morning, and radios, helicopters, planes and other equipment improved safety dramatically over the generations.

But now, with hotter, larger fires growing ever more intense in a warming world, creating “fire tornadoes” and walls of flame hundreds of feet tall, whole towns could again burn down, fire experts say.

“This is the kind of urban conflagration Americans thought they had banished in the early 20th century,” [wrote Stephen Pyne, an Arizona State University fire historian, last week, of the Paradise disaster.](#) “It’s like watching measles or polio return.”

Earlier this year, California lawmakers passed a bill that promises \$1 billion in state funding over the next five years in grants to cities, counties, fire departments and nonprofit groups to thin overgrown forests around towns, cut fuel breaks and conduct controlled burns to restore some natural balance.

Scott Stephens, a fire scientist at UC Berkeley, has estimated that the state and federal government will need to increase such thinning and controlled burning tenfold from current levels to make a difference. That will cost billions of dollars.

Another challenge is population growth.

From 1990 to 2010, there was a 41 percent increase in the number of houses in America's "wild land-urban interface" — the area where homes and forests meet, and where wildfire problems are most pronounced, according to [a study last year led by the University of Wisconsin](#). One in three Americans now lives in those fire-prone areas.

Add to that California's 2012-2017 drought, which killed 129 million trees, mostly in the Sierra Nevada and its foothills. That left enormous amounts of dead vegetation, primed to burn.

McLean, of Cal Fire, said the solution going forward must be more vigilance. More education campaigns to teach people how to create "defensible space" around their homes. More forest thinning. More controlled burns. More escape route drills. More firefighting equipment.



The San Francisco skyline is barely visible from Vista Point in Sausalito, Calif. on Monday, Nov. 12, 2018. Smoke from the Camp Fire in Paradise has drifted south over much of the Bay Area. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

Others say that tougher building codes are needed. Some suggest burying power lines, which cause many of California's worst fires. But that costs 10 times as much as stringing them on poles. And there are 176,000 miles of power lines in California.

While 3 degrees of warming in the past 40 years might not seem like a lot, it makes a big difference in the moisture levels of plants, said Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at UCLA.

Moisture levels in vegetation across California remain today at some of the lowest levels ever recorded, even as autumn wind conditions increase fire risk.

Normally, by mid-November, the ground and the vegetation is damp. So sparks from cars, power lines and campfires have a difficult time growing into large fires, Swain noted. But increasingly, the storms that once soaked California have been blocked in the fall and spring months because of ridges of high pressure in the Pacific Ocean. Some scientists are tying those “ridiculously resilient ridges” to changes driven by melting sea ice in the Arctic.

“Unfortunately, the later and later extent of the fire season into autumn is something we are going to have to cope with,” Swain said. “We are already starting to see it. We didn’t really get major wildfires into November and December before, but we are now. This really is a new thing.”

WaterNews

Counting Homes Cut Off From Water Is A Data Collection Nightmare

November 20, 2018/in [Water News](#), [Water Policy & Politics](#) /by [Brett Walton](#)

California utilities revolt against state attempt for more water shutoff information.



Water utilities do not collect shutoff data in a way that is helpful for understanding links to the rising cost of water service, researchers say. Photo © J. Carl Ganter/Circle of Blue

By Brett Walton, Circle of Blue

Earlier this year, state regulators sent California's roughly 3,000 community water systems an annual report that included what the authors thought was a reasonable question. How many times in 2017, the State Water Resources Control Board asked, had local providers turned off water to their residential customers?

What the question stirred instead was an information revolt, according to Max Gomberg of the Water Board. The data wasn't there, utilities said. At least not in a useful format.

"We had systems saying, 'We don't track that,'" Gomberg told Circle of Blue. "They said, 'We can give you a number, but we can't tell you how many are repeat shutoffs, how many are because the households couldn't pay, or how many are because the people may have moved.'"

The utilities, Gomberg recalled, were worried that the data would be wielded against them, to publicly shame them or make them look bad for turning off water. "It was a protest, if you will, to the question," Gomberg said.

Shutting off a home's water service can cause health problems and worsen a poor family's financial distress. The data the Water Board sought are essential to understanding a crucial social justice issue in a state with, by [one measure](#), the nation's highest poverty rate due to high costs of living. A large number of shutoffs is seen as an indicator of a mismatch between the cost of

water service and the ability of customers to pay for it. But how direct is the link? The Water Board wanted to gain a clearer understanding about how the [rising cost of municipal water](#) affects access to water for the poor.

The same data are also valuable to researchers who are trying to track the progress of the state's six-year-old human right to water statute, a path-breaking law intended to ensure every state resident, regardless of their income, has "safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes." The law resulted in [substantial changes](#) in water policy and practice.

"We don't have a comprehensive idea of how many people are getting water shut off, which is why the Board is trying to collect data. And we really don't know much about the causes for shutoffs," Greg Pierce, a researcher at UCLA's Luskin Center for Innovation who studies water affordability and access, told Circle of Blue.

A third consideration is that California water providers, in less than two years, will be obligated to track the number of water shutoffs as part of data reporting requirements. On September 28, Governor Jerry Brown signed [Senate Bill 998](#), which requires utilities, starting in February 2020, to post on their web sites and report to the Water Board the annual number of shutoffs for inability to pay. Shutoff data today is generally not publically accessible and must be gained through a public records request.

The Association of California Water Agencies, which represents large utilities, objected to the "inability to pay" language, arguing that its members may not know the reasons for a shutoff. However, Heather Engel, a spokeswoman, told Circle of Blue that the association will not challenge the requirement.

"It's important for the state to know," Gomberg said. "We know that drinking water costs are going up. People across the state are struggling with basic needs. If more people are getting water shut off, it's a public health issue. That requires a policy response from the state."

Imprecise Data Is A Common Problem

California water utilities are not the only ones splashing around in a shallow pool of shutoff data. Few utilities nationwide set up their billing systems and data collection processes to adequately parse their numbers, according to several recent reports and interviews with utility managers.

Disconnections, for instance, might have nothing to do with household poverty. Phoenix, with a resident population that fluctuates with the change of seasons, has homes that are empty for part of the year. "We have people who move in and move out," Kathryn Sorensen, director of the Phoenix Water Department, told Circle of Blue. "You have to look carefully at the numbers. A shutoff for nonpayment is not necessarily indicative of affordability problems. People leave town and forget to make arrangements. Or, they're too wealthy to be bothered with such details."

Utilities turn off water service when customers do not pay their bills on time. Every utility has [different protocols](#) for when the disconnection occurs and how much residents must pay to get their water turned on again. Before shutting off service, most utilities make several attempts to contact the homeowner, and some offer repayment plans.

Food and Water Watch, a prominent national research and advocacy group, tried a fresh approach earlier this year. To get a handle on the most basic data — the number of shutoffs — the group sent requests to the two largest water utilities in each state. The group asked for the

number of residential households disconnected from water service in 2016 and the number of residential accounts.

Seventy-three utilities responded. Shutoff rates — the number of shutoff households divided by the number of accounts — varied widely, according to Food and Water Watch’s [report](#), which was published in October. Rates ranged from 23 percent in Oklahoma City and 20 percent in Tulsa, to 1 percent in Baltimore, Boston, and Dallas. Three utilities — Eau Claire, Wisconsin; Leominster, Massachusetts; and the Champlain Water District in Vermont — did not shut off any homes in 2016.

After comparing the number of shutoffs with economic factors, the Food and Water Watch researchers found connections in the high-shutoff cities to poverty, household income, and unemployment. But overall, they found it difficult to draw national conclusions with the limited data: “Overall, the shutoff rates have no obvious direct association with poverty rates, bottom household income quintiles, or unemployment rates. There are likely too many other various factors that influence shutoffs, including housing characteristics, water bill burdens, and local policies.”

Even Food and Water Watch’s relatively straightforward request was more detail than some utilities could provide. Instead of the number of unique homes shut off, 15 utilities provided the total number of shutoffs. Total shutoffs could include a single home being cut off multiple times, which would inflate the figures.

“We didn’t often get more data or more fine-tuned data than what we asked for,” Mary Grant, the lead researcher on the report, told Circle of Blue.



“They said, ‘They should just go to the Detroit River and get their water,’” said Baxter Jones, a wheelchair-bound Detroit resident, referring to statements made by city officials. “That’s just a mean-spirited thing to say to people.” Jones was among 19 people arrested for civil disobedience when they blocked crews from shutting off residential water connections in July 2014. Photo © J. Carl Ganter/Circle of Blue

Another water research group ran into the same obstacles. A [report](#) published at the end of October by the Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based organization, looked at shutoff rates for 15

California utilities. While most had shutoff rates below 4 percent, one small utility in the Central Valley disconnected three in 10 households.

Laura Feinstein, the report author, urged caution in interpreting the data because utilities count shutoffs in different ways and not all shutoffs indicate overwhelming water bills.

“Our goal was to put out the little bit of information we had to frame the debate, to point out that it is worth exploring further,” Feinstein told Circle of Blue.

Feinstein’s top recommendation is for utilities to submit consistent, comparable data. At minimum, utilities should document whether a home is occupied or unoccupied when water is shut off. They could also report data monthly, which would identify homes with multiple shutoffs, and track how long water is turned off.

Some of those recommendations are being employed elsewhere. The Detroit Water and Sewage Department, maligned for [mass shut offs in 2014](#) that affected thousands of households, now instructs its shutoff crew to note whether the home appears to be occupied.

Since it began tracking data this way in May, the department has deemed 39 percent of homes where it disconnected water service to be vacant. Because the assessment is done from the street, the number is a crude estimate, acknowledges Bryan Peckinpaugh, a department spokesman.

“It could be more or less, because the vacant number is done by visual check from the outside of the property,” Peckinpaugh told Circle of Blue.

In California, the State Water Board scrapped the initial data-gathering plan from earlier this year. The Board is now working with a group of three dozen utilities and non-governmental organizations to develop a better way of tracking and collecting shutoff data, something that the utilities requested.

“Moving forward, any data requests should be well-formulated and amply vetted through an open and transparent stakeholder process. The current one-sided closed process is unlikely to result in improved data quality or a better informed process,” wrote Michael Carlin, deputy general manager of the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission [in a letter](#) to the Water Board on May 31, 2018.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power is one of the utilities in the working group.

“LADWP is cooperating as an active participant in [the Board’s] stakeholder group working to develop guidelines for reporting data. The group meets monthly in Sacramento and LADWP will continue to be a part of the ongoing conversation through 2019,” said Christina Holland, a spokeswoman, in a statement emailed to Circle of Blue.

LADWP did not want to comment on its data collection methods while still in discussion with the working group.

[Brett Walton](#)

Brett writes about agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and the politics and economics of water in the United States. He also writes the [Federal Water Tap](#), Circle of Blue’s weekly digest of U.S. government water news. He is the winner of two Society of Environmental Journalists reporting awards, one of the top honors in American environmental journalism: [first place for explanatory reporting for a series on septic system pollution in the United States](#)(2016) and third place for beat reporting in a small market (2014). Brett lives in Seattle, where he hikes the mountains and bakes pies. [Contact Brett Walton](#)

San Francisco Chronicle

Deadline Extended For Los Medanos Health Advisory Committee Applicants

Bay City News Service

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The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors has extended an application period for those interested in applying for a position on the Los Medanos Community Health Advisory Committee until the end of this month.

The volunteer position is a 2-year appointment on the committee, county officials said, which focuses on developing an area health plan to determine community health needs, identify priorities in the county to address the needs and facilities requests for proposals.

The committee was developed in July 2018 as part of a plan to dissolve the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District - according to county officials - to increase funding available for healthcare programming in the Pittsburg/Bay Point areas.

Residents and those who work in the territory of the district are welcome to apply.

The committee will hold an inaugural meeting in January 2019 if the plan to dissolve the district is finalized by the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission. No timeline for final approval of the dissolution was provided by the county.

Anyone wishing to apply by the Nov. 30, 5 p.m. deadline can visit <https://ca-contracostacounty2.civicplus.com/6408/Boards-and-Commissions-Database> or by calling the clerk of the Board of Supervisors at (925) 335-1900.

Applicants should be ready for public interviews in Martinez on Monday, Dec. 10, county officials said.

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East Bay Times

LAFCO rejects Los Medanos health district's request to stay in business



Greg Stidham/Times archive

The former Los Medanos Community Hospital building, which closed in 1994, is shown here in 1997 before it reopened as the Pittsburg Health Clinic.

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A Contra Costa County healthcare district that has long outlived the Pittsburg hospital it once operated — Los Medanos Community Hospital — will dissolve unless advocates collect enough signatures in time to put it to a popular vote or stop the process outright.

The embattled district has survived several attempts at dissolution since the hospital closed in 1994, but last week the Local Agency Formation Commission, an independent agency that oversees the expansion or dissolution of local governments, rejected its request to reconsider the ordered shutdown. A protest hearing has been set for Nov. 30, when petitioners can present signatures and appeal.

If at least 10,500 signatures are certified, the issue will go to a public vote. If the district collects roughly double that many signatures, it can stop the dissolution proceedings.

Itika Greene, Los Medanos Community Hospital's interim executive director, urged the commission at its Nov. 14 meeting to save the healthcare district, calling it a community asset.

"The county should be supporting the local community efforts, see it (district) as a strength and work collaboratively with that," she said. "... Keeping the control local indicates that you respect the voice of the community, that you respect the efforts by people who live in the community and serve the community. Why not put it to a vote, let the community decide?"

District board member Patt Young called the dissolution and the transfer of the district to the county, which the commission approved in mid-September, a "power grab."

"If you truly respect the voices of the district's residents, you will stop the dissolution," she said.

Los Medanos Community Healthcare District, which has served Pittsburg, Bay Point and parts of Antioch, Concord, Clayton and Clyde since 1948, is the last survivor of three county health care districts. It operated the Pittsburg hospital from 1948 until 1994, when it declared bankruptcy and shuttered the facility. In 2000, a residents' petition called for the district's dissolution, saying it wasted taxpayers' money, but LAFCO rejected it.

Seventeen years later, in the fall of 2017, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors applied to LAFCO to begin the dissolution process and transfer all of the district's assets and debts to the county. Despite its past financial problems, the district still owns the former hospital building on Leland and Loveridge roads, though the county has leased it and operated a health clinic there since 1998.

Questions about what would happen to the county's largest clinic, the Pittsburg Health Center, and myriad health and social programs operated by the district dominated the two-hour Nov. 14 LAFCO hearing, which saw more than a dozen speakers present their cases for and against dissolution. But because LAFCO already approved the dissolution on Sept. 12, the commission could only reconsider the matter based on new information that was previously unavailable.

Even so, Elizabeth Calciano of the Hensley Law group, special counsel for the district, urged LAFCO to reverse its decision, noting 11,000 signatures already had been collected in an effort to force a public vote on the dissolution.

"We ask you to slow it down and provide more time to really study this. What will be lost with this dissolution?"

Calciano also suggested there's a conflict of interest because the district's attorney went to work for LAFCO's general counsel in September and did not resign from the district until October.

But Kara Ueda of BB&K, LAFCO's general counsel, noted a firewall had been set up, the attorneys worked in different cities and the LAFCO voted for dissolution before the attorney went to work for the same firm the commission was using.

Others also urged LAFCO to allow voters to decide, noting they fear local health programs would be lost without the district.

Jeanette Ortiz of Pittsburg said she goes to the Pittsburg Health Center on a regular basis, and fears what will happen if the county takes over.

“You want the building?” she asked. “Where is the healthcare going to go? We need a place to have our healthcare clinic. Stop this and let the community vote — give it back to the people because we are the ones supporting our communities — this is not a democracy — this is more of a dictatorship.”

County Supervisor Federal Glover, however, assured her and others that the clinic was not going away.

“The grant program is part of the agreement of dissolution of the district,” he said. “...The services will still be provided — hopefully, a major enhancement of services will be provided.”

Supervisor Diane Burgis echoed that sentiment, noting that under the county, 85 percent of the grant funding will go toward nonprofit health programs and only 10 percent for administrative costs and 5 percent to reserves.

“We will be able to increase local funding to nonprofits by 70 percent,” she said.

As part of its Sept. 12 resolution dissolving the district, LAFCO expanded the number of local representatives from five to seven on a new citizens’ committee that would advise the county on the grants, and also stipulated that if the former Los Medanos Community Hospital hospital building were ever sold, proceeds would have to be used in the Pittsburg area for healthcare programs.

Earlier this year, a Contra Costa Grand Jury recommended that the beleaguered healthcare district be dissolved, noting it spends more on administrative costs than it allocates in grants, and no longer runs a hospital. The April 19 report also detailed what the jury called fiscal mismanagement, duplication of services and a lack of transparency.

The report was [the fourth](#) one critical of the district’s operations.

Former district board member Allen Tatomer said the district has had an “ongoing pattern of controversy” and “protectionistic behavior that spanned the past 20 years.”

“The district has refused to consider dissolution as an option for their future and has dedicated vast sums of money to (fight) efforts to call for its dissolution,” said Tatomer, who served from 2000 to 2005.

“It’s really time to close these superfluous and redundant healthcare districts, which seems to be a trend in this state,” he said. “They are no longer serving to manage the hospitals that they were created to serve.”

Commissioner Don Blubaugh said he understood the passion residents have for the healthcare district, but added that he stood by the earlier decision to dissolve it.

“When the county application came in — the district does not have clean hands — we had to look at the district’s history, the grand jury report,” he said. “What really matters is people who are being served by health care and not the bureaucracies that provide that service.”

Published **November 28th, 2018**

Halfway through, Alliance contract a financial and operational success

By Nick Marnell



Photo courtesy ConFire

There were times when Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Carman felt unsure about the future of the Alliance, the business model that he spearheaded to provide ambulance transport service for most of Contra Costa County, which has performed better than critics expected.

When the county hired Carman in 2013 to run the struggling fire district, he was charged with finding new sources of revenue. "The ambulance contract was the low-hanging fruit," Carman said, as the county contract with American Medical Response to provide ambulance service was expiring at the end of 2015. Carman reasoned that ConFire could not only provide faster ambulance response times but also provide them more cost effectively by eliminating the duplication of resources on medical calls.

But many thought the chief was taking on too much, and was dangerously shifting the financial risks of an ambulance service from a private company to taxpayers. "There were people saying we couldn't even run a fire department, so how were we going to run an ambulance service?" Carman said.

The chief quickly learned that he could not do it by himself. Consultants convinced Carman that the prudent thing to do was to team up with AMR as a subcontractor and pitch for the ambulance contract as the Alliance. For \$200 million over five years, AMR agreed to provide ConFire a trained and knowledgeable workforce, equipment and unmatched buying power.

Not all of Carman's experiences with consultants were positive. An early presentation to the board of directors by a poorly prepared consultant nearly derailed the project. "That presentation was inaccurate, terrible. Were it not for me being new and the board understanding, I think that could have shot us down," Carman said.

Citygate Associates, a consultant that the county hired to project Alliance financial data, told the board that the numbers would be only 10 percent of what the chief had forecast. "Although it still showed us as being profitable, it wasn't what I was sharing with my bosses. At the end of the day we were right and they were wrong," Carman said.

After ConFire secured the five-year contract, things did not begin smoothly, mainly due to technology issues in the district dispatch center. Response times were long. It took over a month for the AMR dispatch center to merge with ConFire's. "I called for meetings to talk about the issues every morning and ultimately we got it worked out. But for me, it was a nightmare," Carman said.

Problems also arose with the billing agency. "Things they said they could do they were now saying they couldn't," the chief said. "I was watching the finances like a hawk, and with every little glitch I would have someone on the phone. It all worked out, but it was just that there were so many naysayers out there that I didn't want anything to go wrong."

Thirty months into the 60-month contract, not much has gone wrong.

According to its 2017 annual report, Alliance 2017 response times on 74,000 transports dropped a minimum of 32 seconds from the 2015 response times under AMR. District records show that Lafayette 2017 response times improved nearly three minutes over the 10 minutes, 37 seconds of 2015, the final year of the county AMR contract.

The county reports Alliance financial information in a special Emergency Medical Services Transport Fund. Revenue for 2017-18 totaled \$51 million with expenses of \$44 million, and as of June 30 the Alliance reported a surplus of nearly \$17 million for its first 30 months of operation.

Perils lie ahead, like the uncertainties of the Affordable Care Act and potentially disgruntled AMR employees who opposed the passage of Proposition 11, requiring ambulance workers to remain on call through their meal and rest breaks. Also hovering is the decision of the California Emergency Medical Services Agency to take away ConFire's exclusive right to provide county ambulance service, alleging that the county Board of Supervisors suppressed competition in awarding the contract to a company - ConFire - for which it also

serves as the governing board. The county has appealed the decision.

Carman agreed that securing the ambulance contract was a career accomplishment, though he still gets nervous knowing that nationwide many are watching the Alliance business model, which is the first of its kind in California.

In 2016, the chief resisted high fives until he saw results after six months. "Now, three years later, we are going strong," Carman said. "Providing excellent service, using resources efficiently, and remaining financially sustainable - everything we promised."

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East Bay Times

Access denied: Judge blocks cyclists' popular East Bay cut-through

Calle Arroyo has been used for decades to avoid Diablo Road in Danville

By [Erin Baldassari](#) | ebaldassari@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
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DIABLO — A judge's ruling to block public access to a popular cut-through for cyclists on their way to Mount Diablo State Park could put people's lives at risk, biking advocates say.

For decades, bicyclists have been turning down oak-lined Calle Arroyo at the entrance to Diablo Country Club to avoid Diablo Road in Danville, which is notorious for its narrow lanes, fast-moving traffic and blind curves. Two cyclists were [seriously injured there last year](#) by a hit-and-run driver, reopening a long-standing debate over safety along the scenic corridor.

But that may be the only quick option for cyclists now. A Contra Costa County Superior Court judge on Monday officially signed a [ruling](#) declaring the public has no right to access the road — even if it may be a difficult ruling to enforce.



A group of students from the San Ramon High School mountain bike club along with friends from other schools ride up Calle Arroyo Road to bypass a stretch of Diablo road on their way up to Mt. Diablo State Park in Danville, Calif., on Monday, Feb. 19, 2018. (File photo by Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

Limiting access to the country club disproportionately impacts students in the area who use the route to get to school and for training on the high school mountain biking team, said Al Kalin, president of the [Mount Diablo Cyclists](#), a bicycling advocacy organization.

“The judge’s ruling affects tens of thousands of cyclists,” Kalin said, “but specifically the local mountain bike high school teams who have for years rode down Calle Arroyo.”

The alternative, however, of having cyclists barreling down the barely two-lane, unmarked roads in Diablo is also perilous, contends Robert Tiernan, the lead plaintiff in the suit. He [filed the suit](#) earlier this year on behalf of several other homeowners along the road after seeing a growing number of cyclists riding in “loud packs,” overtaking cars and endangering seniors and small children. His parents, who are both in their 90’s and live on the same road, have had cyclists clip their car or yell at them, he said.

“After all that,” Tiernan said, “it was becoming too dangerous.”



Cyclist Al Kalin, a member of the Mt. Diablo Cyclists talks about the route that leads cyclists through the Diablo County Club on Calle Arroyo Road in Danville, Calif., on Friday, Feb. 16, 2018. (File photo by Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

In the end, the court case hinged not on questions about which road is safer — but who can control its access. And it was here the plaintiffs prevailed.

They argued that because the country club community was formed as a private community, there has never been any express or implied public access, said Dominic Signorotti, the plaintiffs’ attorney. An attorney for [Bike East Bay](#), a cycling advocacy organization and defendant in the suit, argued the Diablo Community Services District, which governs the country club community, received public funds to make improvements on Calle Arroyo. That would imply the roads are meant for public use, or else that the district used the funds illegally.

The judge said that wasn't enough.

“There is no evidence that any of this money is spent on Calle Arroyo. And even if it did, so what?” Judge Charles Treat wrote in his ruling. “If the district is illegally spending money, it ought to stop doing so. But that doesn't mean the district can create an easement over its members' properties by spending money.”

The comment, while not dismissing the suit, did open another question: Has the Diablo Community Service District, which governs the bucolic community, been spending taxpayers' money on private roads?

“It's sort of an open question,” said Dave Campbell, the advocacy director for Bike East Bay.

The district is looking into it and will adjust future spending accordingly, said Christie Crawl, an attorney for the district.



Bob Tiernan, longtime resident of the Diablo Country Club shows photos of some of the crowds of bicyclists that pass his home off Calle Arroyo Road in Danville, Calif., on Friday, Feb. 16, 2018. (File photo by Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

But that still leaves the question of how to enforce the ruling. The judge determined the district has no authority to prevent the general public from using Calle Arroyo, Crawl said. And, doing so could easily violate people's constitutional rights, said Lt. Jason Haynes, a sheriff's deputy in charge of the Diablo subdivision. As long as the person in question agrees to move along, there is no way to cite them for trespassing, he said.

“If it's private property but publicly accessible, it will be very difficult to take any enforcement action,” he said. “We can't proactively patrol and try to ID people within the community, or that would be a blatant disregard for people's rights.”

For now, however, Campbell is recommending cyclists avoid Calle Arroyo, if they can. The judge's ruling applies only to the single street of Calle Arroyo, though the plaintiffs recently filed an amendment to expand the ruling's reach to include a tiny path over private property that links to a public road leading to Mount Diablo State Park. If the judge rules in favor of the amendment, it will constrict access to the park even further and could have serious implications for cyclists' safety — implications with legal precedent backing it, Campbell said.

The city of Danville is redoing an environmental review of a proposed development because a judge ruled it would [create more traffic on Diablo Road and endanger cyclists](#). Campbell is hoping the same thinking will apply here if cyclists are forced onto Diablo Road.

“If you attempt to close that path, that is subject to (the California Environmental Quality Act) and you need to do an (environmental impact report),” he said, “because that affects the safety of people bicycling.”

The Daily Journal

New face: Sequoia Healthcare District board takes shape

Nayfack tops Hickey; Faro, Shefren re-elected

- By Anna Schuessler Daily Journal staff
- Nov 27, 2018 Updated Nov 27, 2018

A long campaign to dissolve the Sequoia Healthcare District faltered on Election Day when voters voiced support for incumbents Arthur Faro and Jerry Shefren and newcomer and physician Aaron Nayfack, who unseated 16-year board member Jack Hickey.

Earning more than 66 percent support from district voters in Zone C, Nayfack hoped his victory over Hickey could help bring an end to a debate over whether the district should be dissolved or continue to allocate funds to a variety of organizations providing health care programs. Led by Hickey and supported by candidates Harland Harrison and Art Kiesel, the yearslong call to dissolve the district became a defining issue in the first set of zone-based elections held in the district after officials voted unanimously to switch from at-large elections late last year.

Nayfack prevailed over Hickey in Zone C, which includes San Carlos and Emerald Hills, while Faro garnered 44.8 percent of the vote in Zone A, which includes Redwood Shores and Foster City, and held off Kiesel, a former Foster City mayor who earned 24.3 percent of the vote, and retired nonprofit CEO Michael Garb, who received 30.9 percent support from voters. In Zone E, which extends from Portola Valley to parts of Belmont, Shefren received about 76 percent support from voters and maintained his seat on the board despite Harrison's challenge.

"I'm really thrilled with the results and was excited to kind of have my views on the future of the [Sequoia] Healthcare District validated," said Nayfack, who noted the elections results across all three zones indicated voters were supportive of the district's work and didn't align with a call to dissolve it. "Hopefully we can lay that debate to rest and move forward in a productive manner."

Arguing that because the district no longer supports the Sequoia Hospital as was its purpose when it was formed in 1946, it should no longer collect taxes for health care services unless voters approve, Hickey has long raised questions about the district's role in the community. Though the district oversaw Sequoia Hospital for decades, it was eventually handed to the nonprofit now known as Dignity Health and, in 2007, it contributed some \$75 million to construct a new facility while releasing its supervisory role by giving up seats on the hospital's governing board.

Largely bounded by parts of Foster City and Menlo Park as well as Woodside to the west, the district is expected to generate some \$12.5 million in taxes for distribution toward grants and programs in the 2018-19 fiscal year and has supported the operations of Samaritan House's medical clinic in Redwood City, the Ravenswood Family Health Center in East Palo Alto and a variety of other

programs and nonprofits, such as Peninsula Volunteers and the Boys and Girls Club of the Peninsula, according to a previous staff report

For Hickey, whether information he said misrepresented the value of the health benefits he received while serving as a district board member and spread in the weeks leading up to the election had an effect on his bid for re-election remained a question, alongside the lack of editorial endorsements from local media and forums for candidates running in the district's zones this year.

And though he said he doesn't plan to run for a seat on the board again, he didn't waver from his belief that voters should have a chance to decide whether they want to dissolve the district or merge it with the Peninsula Health Care District, which funds community health care programs and resources for residents of Burlingame, Foster City, Hillsborough, Millbrae, San Bruno and San Mateo.

"They either need to expand countywide or they need to dissolve, that's the path," he said.

He said he plans to reach out to other stakeholder agencies, such as fire and school districts, to petition the San Mateo County Local Agency Formation Commission to call an election and let voters decide the fate of the district.

Opposing the dedication of district funds to programs that had the potential to benefit residents outside the district and taking the lead on a successful referendum in 2003 to derail a plan to demolish the Sequoia Hospital and rebuild it near Highway 101 were among the accomplishments for which Hickey was most proud. He previously alleged the referendum effort ultimately led to a major seismic upgrade of the hospital at its current location at Whipple Avenue and Alameda de las Pulgas in Redwood City.

'A more harmonious board'

For Faro, the elections results showed a pretty clear message from voters that they don't agree with the approach Hickey, Harrison and Kiesel were proposing in the weeks leading up to the election. He said he looked forward to serving on a board that would work more collaboratively toward serving the community, noting Hickey's requests of district staff have been disruptive of their work and his challenges to district priorities have cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees without any justification.

"We now have five people who strongly support helping the community," he said. "We will have a more harmonious board and be able to get our business done a lot more expeditiously than in the past."

Shefren didn't think the elections results would incite much change in the direction district officials have taken, but noted the addition of someone with medical expertise and who believes in the district's mission could lead to improved decision-making. He also acknowledged the results demonstrated voters overwhelmingly voiced support for keeping the district in play, and looked to an upcoming strategic planning session to shed light on the board's funding priorities in the coming months.

“Mental health is the very big issue everywhere,” he said. “We don’t have enough money to solve it all; we have to figure out where we can invest and make a difference.”

Acknowledging Hickey had been against the district from the beginning, board President Kathleen Kane said she was pleased with the elections results as well as the addition of Nayfack to the board, noting his insights and enthusiasm for the board’s work will be a great benefit. Kane and Vice President Kim Griffin’s terms are set to expire in 2020.

Kane expected district officials to stay committed to investing taxpayer revenue in community health programs.

“Those programs just would not be there and those benefits just would not be there without our support,” she said. “I’m happy to being able to provide that to the community.”

Currently serving as the board’s vice president, Kim Griffin also welcomed Nayfack to the board, noting his experience as a pediatrician and goals for the board will be a boon to the district’s work.

Priorities

Griffin pegged a proposed merger between Dignity Health and Catholic Health Initiatives and ensuring adequate mental health services are provided for district residents of all ages as among the priorities for district officials going forward. Though she acknowledged the district already invests a lot in the mental health services offered by its nonprofit partners and the Healthy Schools Initiative, Griffin pegged working with the Peninsula Health Care District board to scope a mental health center for teens as among the projects she hopes to tackle in the coming months.

“There’s still a big need for [mental health] services that are really not being filled in the Bay Area,” she said. “It’s not just a problem isolated to our particular district.”

Though she acknowledged Hickey’s views often countered those of others on the board, Sequoia Healthcare District CEO Pamela Kurtzman noted his vote usually wasn’t successful in sidetracking the work of district officials and didn’t expect the elections results to have a drastic impact on the projects on which district officials are focused. But she did acknowledge Nayfack’s election to the board could mark a shift toward a more collaborative, strategic approach to the district’s future work.

For Kurtzman, the elections results also settled the question of whether the district should exist by showing voters were not supportive of an effort to dissolve it.

“I see it just as less of a road block in terms of just having to deal with a contentious person and then having someone who’s strategic and open-minded in supporting the work,” she said. “That’s the other piece, is that we’re recognized for the work that we do and the work that we want to do going forward.”

Signatures submitted in bid to put Los Medanos health care's future on ballot

If enough of the signatures collected are certified, a public vote will decide the district's future



Itika Greene, a volunteer with REading ADvantages in 2016 and a retired public health nurse, is now the executive director of Los Medanos Community Healthcare District. (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group archives)

By [Judith Prieve](mailto:jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com) | jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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In a move they hope will save the Los Medanos Community Health Care District from being dissolved, district employees and advocates submitted more than 16,500 signatures Friday to put its fate in the hands of voters.

The embattled district had until Friday to present 10,874 verifiable signatures to temporarily halt the dissolution, which the Local Agency Formation Commission approved earlier this fall and reaffirmed Nov. 14 when it rejected the district's request to reconsider the ordered shutdown.

Itika Greene, Los Medanos' executive director, said advocates had only five weeks to collect the signatures from residents of Pittsburg, Bay Point and parts of Antioch, Concord, Clayton and Clyde who are served by the district.

"We feel very positive that we have been as successful as we have been," she said. "We are going to see what happens."

Had the district collected about 21,000 signatures, it could have stopped the dissolution proceedings outright. LAFCO now has 30 days to check the signatures, and if enough are certified, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors has 45 days to set a special election date. In addition, the board must determine whether the voting will be by precinct or mail-in ballot.

Greene has urged the commission to save the healthcare district, calling it a community asset. In addition to the signatures, she noted the district has collected thousands of letters of support.

“Voters — not politicians — should decide on the future of our public community healthcare district,” Greene said. “We stand ready to work with the county to avoid the expense of a special election...”

Although Los Medanos Community Hospital closed in 1994, the district that ran it has continued to operate since then, distributing and overseeing a variety of health-related grants for local programs. The district has survived several attempts to dismantle it. In 2000, a residents’ petition called for the district’s dissolution, saying it wasted taxpayers’ money since there’s no more hospital to oversee, but LAFCO rejected it.

Last fall, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors asked LAFCO to begin the dissolution process again and transfer all of the district’s assets and debts to the county. Despite its past financial problems, the district still owns the former hospital building on Leland and Loveridge roads, though the county has leased it and operated a health clinic there since 1998.

Greene, a retired public health nurse manager who joined Los Medanos as director two months ago, said the healthcare district wants to maintain its relationship with the county but does not want to see its program lose local control.

“The county is trying to seize our district assets at a time when the number of uninsured is anticipated to increase, with at-risk and immigrant populations among the most affected,” she said. “In spite of everything, we stand ready to work with the county as partners.”

Despite county assurances, Greene said she’s also concerned about losing support for programs and services, such as the community garden that serves 90 families, the REading ADvantages Program, Loaves and Fishes meals, and more. Such smaller programs could go away under county control, she said.

“The county does great, but I don’t support this part (the district dissolution),” she said. “I want to see a community asset remain in the community and expand and do things even better.”

Earlier, County Supervisor Federal Glover assured district supporters the clinic was not going away and could even see improvements under county control.

Supervisor Diane Burgis also noted that under the county, 85 percent of the grant funding will go toward nonprofit health programs and only 10 percent for administrative costs and 5 percent into

reserves. That means 70 percent more grant money would go toward health programs than does now with the district handling the grants, she said.

Others criticized what the district spends outside of its health programs, including as much as \$240,000 for the paid signature gatherers and \$90,000 for printing and mailing services involved in the ballot initiative effort.

“These are examples of administrative overhead that the district has been seeing that is not going directly to health care services,” Commissioner Charles Lewis said at the Nov. 14 LAFCO meeting. “This reinforces the commission’s decision to dissolve this district and transfer the responsibility to the county.”

Earlier this year, the Contra Costa Grand Jury recommended that the district be dissolved, noting it spends more on administrative expenses than it allocates in grants, and no longer runs a hospital.

East Bay Times

November 30, 2018

Tax-funded fight to save health district abhorrent
Editorial

If there was any doubt that the Los Medanos Health Care District should be dissolved, the board's \$400,000 taxpayer-funded campaign to save it should be the final straw.

The district has hired a professional petition firm and is paying, using public money, \$11 a signature in a misguided effort to stop the long-overdue closure of the dysfunctional agency.

Residents of Pittsburg and Bay Point should be outraged that money that should be going for health care services is being used for such blatantly political purposes.

And they shouldn't swallow the false claims that closing the agency would reduce services in the community and endanger the future of the county's health care clinic in Pittsburg.

It's just the opposite.

Closing the district would end the agency's wasteful expenditures of property tax money on administrative overhead, leave more funds for health services within the district and help ensure the survival of the county clinic.

The district hasn't operated a hospital since 1994, when the district went bankrupt. Its only significant asset, the old hospital building, is now leased to the county, which has refurbished it to house the clinic.

Meanwhile, the district continues to collect roughly \$1 million a year from property taxes, and over the past six fiscal years spent about 46 percent of its income on administrative costs, according to data collected by the Contra Costa County grand jury. It spent more on administration than on health-related grants and programs.

The district should be disbanded, as the grand jury recommended in April. In September, the county Local Agency Formation Commission, which has authority under state law to close government agencies that have outlived their usefulness, voted to dissolve the Los Medanos district and turn over its assets and income to the county.

The county would use that money to continue providing much-needed health care to residents of the district. Indeed, there would be more money available for health care because the county would be required to spend at least 85 percent of the income on programs and grants within the district. No more than 15 percent would go to administrative overhead and reserves.

But opponents of the deal can force the LAFCO decision to the ballot by submitting 10,874 petition signatures, representing 25 percent of the registered voters in the district. That's what health care district officials plan to do today, the deadline for submitting the petitions.

It would be one thing if this was some sort of grassroots effort to save this district. But that's not what's going on here.

The district has budgeted \$400,000 for the signature gathering drive, legal expenses, a media consultant, charter buses to transport protesters to LAFCO hearings and, if sufficient signatures are collected, the cost of the district- wide election.

For what? To save a district that hasn't provided significant health care for 24 years.

As a general rule, state law and court decisions forbid expenditure of public funds for political advocacy. However, the district claims the restrictions do not apply to a protest petition effort like this one.

If there's any legal ambiguity here, the Legislature needs to step in with corrective legislation. The notion that a wasteful district, which should have been disbanded years ago, can use taxpayer money to try to buy its own survival is abhorrent.



Los Medanos Community Hospital in Pittsburg was closed in 1994, when the health care district went bankrupt. It now houses Contra Costa County's largest health care clinic.
STAFF FILE PHOTO

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