

Drought Felt in Low-Income Bay Area Communities

The impact of the drought in rural California has been well documented, but urban areas are also feeling the effects – and low-income communities are especially hard hit, a new report finds.

Written by Tara Lohan Published on [Jul. 13, 2016](#) Read time Approx. 5 minutes

California's drought, now in its fifth year, has grabbed headlines – many of them focused on the state's mandatory conservation measure enacted last year or the impacts on the agricultural sector, said Heather Cooley, the water program director of the Pacific Institute, a global water think tank.

“Impacts on disadvantaged communities have received far less attention,” she said. “And the attention that there has been has focused on wells running dry in the San Joaquin Valley. There has really been less of a review about the drought and disadvantaged communities more broadly.”

That's changed since the Pacific Institute teamed up with the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water and eight grassroots organizations to put together a community-based participatory research project on [Drought and Equity in the San Francisco Bay Area](#). The research area covers the San Francisco Bay hydrologic region, which is 4,500 square miles (12,000 sq km) and includes San Francisco County and parts of Marin, Sonoma, Napa, Solano, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

The area, Cooley said, is an important case study because it contains a mix of small, rural water systems, and highly urbanized, large systems. These serve communities with racial, social and economic diversity.

While there are few documented cases of wells running dry in the Bay Area, the drought's impacts have manifested in other ways. Margaret Gordon, co-director of [West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project](#), cited aging infrastructure and high prices for water as two of the biggest problems in her community and across the region.

“Old infrastructure and payment – it's the same all over,” said Gordon. “From Sonoma to Bayview-Hunters Point to Richmond to East Oakland to West Oakland to Marin – it's the same thing. The oldest parts of cities historically have been communities of color and there's a lack of a real system that protects them and ensures they have good water.”

Affordability is an issue that's been exacerbated by the drought, said Cooley – with water rates rising faster than inflation and some communities being hit by drought surcharges from water

agencies. Research from the Public Policy Institute of California found that water bills have increased two to three times quicker than inflation in urban areas of the state between 2000 and 2010. “This was needed to cover some of the fixed costs associated with water service,” said Cooley. “But they can exacerbate affordability concerns for low-income households.”

Dan Johnson, a treatment plant operator, inspects a sediment pond at the Roseville Water Treatment Plant in Granite Bay, Calif., in July 2015. Due to reduced water use, Roseville is among the water agencies that have had to impose a “drought surcharge” in order to make up the lost revenue. (Rich Pedroncelli, AP)

Another concern is inequitable use of water. In general, low-income households use less water than those with higher incomes, which are more likely to have pools, larger lots and bigger lawns. For example, the report compares Hillsborough, where the median household income is \$250,000 a year and per capita water use last year was 181 gallons (685 liters) a day, to East Palo Alto, less than 20 miles (32km) away, where median household income is \$53,000 and per capita water use is 43 gallons (163 liters) a day.

“Higher levels of water use place additional burdens and costs on the water system and increase the likelihood of having to develop more expensive water supplies,” the report noted.

As some communities face diminished water supplies and need to augment water resources, an equity issue arises. “Who is driving the need for, the demand for those new supplies, who pays for it and how is it allocated?” asked Cooley.

There are other drought impacts on water systems and ratepayers, as well. In West Oakland, Gordon said that new developments are putting increased pressure on aging infrastructure, when hundreds or thousands of new connections are added to existing pipelines – making a bad problem even worse.

Drought can also lead to overpumping of aquifers (which can cause subsidence and decrease water quality) and increased costs for expensive upgrades to water treatment systems. Some communities reliant on water through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta may be on the hook for future costs related to infrastructure and habitat restoration.

“The Bay Area, despite its wealth, is vulnerable, in many of the same ways, if not to the same degree, as other parts of the state that get a lot more attention – like much of the San Joaquin Valley and the Central Coast, where wells are running dry in mass numbers,” said Colin Bailey, executive director of the [Environmental Justice Coalition for Water](#). “The Bay Area is not immune and the equity impacts of drought are felt statewide first and worst by low-income communities of color, but they have implications for our society as a whole.”

In rural areas the impacts of drought are most often the result of small water systems that are unable to serve a dispersed community with limited resources. In those cases, the entire community is impacted. But in more urban regions, like the Bay Area, “it’s really about pockets of communities that are struggling,” said Cooley. “The solutions are within our reach. There are

programs we can implement to help households and we should be doing it. It isn't just the drought, they are much broader and more long-term.”

The report outlined what an equitable response to drought would look like and grouped the solutions into six categories: fair and equitable water rates; billing practices that meet low-income household needs; low-income financial assistance programs; programs to reduce water use in low-income households; effective communication and outreach strategies; and stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes.

Gordon said that in her community of West Oakland, she'd like to see discussion of a new bond to address equity issues around water infrastructure and water-saving technologies, like gray-water systems, and help them become accessible and widespread.

Later this summer a summit will convene the area's water suppliers with community leaders who worked on the report – which include representatives from Youth United for Community Action, West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project, West County Toxics Coalition, North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance, Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, Shore Up Marin, California Indian Environmental Alliance and Alviso Water Collaborative. There there will be an “opportunity to present their findings and find common cause,” said Bailey.

Research in the coming months will also broaden to encompass the drought impacts on equity statewide. “In some senses, the Bay Area was a primer for what is to come,” said Bailey. “We found that one area of California most widely assumed to not have impacts, in fact does, and the results of a statewide analysis will give rise to a pretty broad sense that no region is in any way immune from some dire consequences for low-income communities of color, which in some parts of the state is an overwhelming majority.”

Water crisis

City stops most new projects

Three well-heeled developments escape East Palo Alto rule

By Kaitlyn Landgraf

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EAST PALO ALTO — A water crisis three decades in the making came to a head this week when East Palo Alto's City Council imposed a moratorium on development until the city can increase its historically meager water supply. For the past 14 years, the city has used nearly all of its annual water allotment, making it increasingly difficult for East Palo Alto to approve new developments, unless they can essentially provide their own water. With no easy or affordable solution in sight, developers are caught in limbo as they wait for the city to obtain additional water resources — a process that could take years. Three well-heeled developments managed to dodge the moratorium at Tuesday night's meeting if they pay a price. Office developments funded by the Sobrato Organization and a private equity firm, and the Primary School, founded by Mark Zuckerberg's wife Priscilla Chan, will be allowed to move forward with the projects if they agree to reimburse the city for the engineering and legal costs incurred by the city's quest to increase its water allocation.

So far, the water shortage has not delayed the Primary School's opening since it plans to start classes this fall in a temporary site, according to the school's spokesman Nathan James. Other proposed developments are out of luck. An affordable housing project owned by the city did not make the cut, nor did 11 other developments that had recently submitted applications to build in East Palo Alto. Many of those developers showed up at Tuesday's meeting to voice their displeasure. "We only found out about this last Thursday," said Jeff Major, a vice president and investment officer with Prologis, a real estate company that last month submitted a development proposal for an industrial building in the Ravenswood district of East Palo Alto. Major requested that the council oppose the moratorium in favor of working with developers to obtain the water. "We'd like to help out in any way we can," he said. The council was unswayed, however. By a 4 to 1 vote, it chose to implement the moratorium, which will last for two years or until the city manages to obtain more water. That won't be easy. The city is pumping more of its own groundwater, but those supplies are limited. It's also trying to buy water from other Bay Area cities and ask the city's main supplier, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, to increase its annual water allocation. But it's unclear how long it would take to buy water from other cities or increase East Palo Alto's water allocation from the SFPUC, according to Sean Charpentier, East Palo Alto's assistant city manager.

That's because neither solution has been attempted before. "This is unprecedented," Charpentier said.

East Palo Alto's current water woes began in 1984 when the SFPUC entered into a contract to sell Hetch Hetchy reservoir water to cities and water agencies on the Peninsula.

East Palo Alto, which historically has been low-income, had only just been incorporated the year before, and its water needs were managed by a county agency that later dissolved.

"Like many communities of color, they're the last to know when the goodies are being handed out," said Gary Kremen, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and member of the Santa Clara Valley Water Board District's board of directors. "East Palo Alto got a super raw deal here." When the SFPUC water was divvied up among Bay Area cities, East Palo Alto was allocated the smallest slice of the water pie — an inequity that persists to today.

With a high share of small lots and multiple-family housing, East Palo Alto consumes less than 57 gallons per person a day, while the tony community of Hillsborough with its luxurious gardens uses more than 301 gallons per person each day. In June, East Palo Alto petitioned the SFPUC to increase its allotment by 1.5 million gallons a day, up from the 1.96 million gallons it currently receives. But an answer isn't likely to come anytime soon: The SFPUC isn't scheduled to vote on the question until December 2018.

And East Palo Alto faces steep hurdles in obtaining water from the utility commission.

In 2008 the SFPUC agreed that it would cap the water it uses from the Tuolumne River until 2018, due to environmental pressures from the Tuolumne River Trust, a conservation group. Kremen says such conservation efforts can complicate the efforts of cities such as East Palo Alto to meet their water needs. "It's that environmental elitism over the need of people of color," said Kremen.

"I'm a conservationist but a lot of things they do that increase the price of water directly affect low-income people, people on fixed incomes and people of color, specifically."

That's not the way Peter Drekmeier sees it.

"It's not the cap so much as the way the water is divided up," said Drekmeier, policy director for the Tuolumne River Trust and former mayor of Palo Alto. "You're absolutely right that East Palo Alto got the short end of the stick, but we're working with them to come up with a solution."

East Palo Alto could also try to buy water from other cities that don't use their full allotment — an uncertain proposal since no one has done it before, said Steven Ritchie, Assistant General Manager of the Water Enterprise at SFPUC. "It's not going to be easy to do, but on the other hand it's easier than providing the additional supply," said Ritchie.

Until it finds a water solution, East Palo Alto is halting development, despite builders' objections. Because of the lack of water, "in effect, we've had a de facto moratorium," said Charpentier. "Processing (development) agreements without proof of water feels like driving toward a cliff." With this solution, he said, "it feels like we're building a bridge."

East Bay Times

Martinez, developer to negotiate Alhambra Highlands sale

By Sam Richards , srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com

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MARTINEZ -- The city and a Houston-based developer will negotiate a possible deal for the sale of 297 acres of land -- a segment of it believed to be part of the estate of renowned naturalist John Muir -- that could become open space, or continue on its path toward becoming a subdivision.

Wednesday night, the City Council agreed to formally negotiate with Richfield Investment Corp. and Richfield Real Estate Corp., the owners of the hilly land south of Highway 4 and between Alhambra Avenue and Alhambra Valley Road popularly known as Alhambra Highlands.

If a sale can be negotiated in coming months, it's possible the land could in turn be sold to a land trust group or open space preservation group -- or that such a group could be the initial buyer.

The city's lead on the project, several involved people said, is crucial in giving the effort gravitas and momentum, which in turn should help attract financial support from outside groups.

"Once you have some commitment, folks can start coming to the table, hopefully," said Jamie Fox, a leader of the local Alhambra Hills Open Space Committee, which has been working since 2010 to preserve the land.

The agreement is for 180 days, which could be terminated sooner than that, or extended.

The City Council approved the current version of the housing project in July 2011, for 109 custom homes on 72 acres within the 297-acre parcel.

But even then, seeds were being sown for this whole parcel to one day become open space. At the City Council's request, Richfield agreed to delay project grading until at least April 2014, to give outside parties time to explore buying the land to keep it as open space.

That date came and went, and no outside parties stepped up. But informal discussions started between Richfield and the city about a land sale, and have continued intermittently since.

Alicia Guerra, a land use attorney for Richfield, told the council Richfield has been working to maintain its development permits and other needed requirements for building houses there, and that the company is prepared to move ahead with the houses.

"If things fall apart, we would move ahead with the final map" to subdivide the property for development, Guerra told the council. Asked after the meeting about Richfield's motivation to discuss selling the land, Guerra stressed it's happening at the behest of the city. "(Richfield) wants to develop it, frankly," she said. "We're going to proceed in good faith."

While Fox and others have praised the city for working to preserve what some call "John Muir's Hill," the city has simultaneously taken flak for not wanting to buy the former Pine Meadow Golf Course and prevent houses from being built there. Developer DeNova Homes of Concord, which now owns the land, plans to build houses there. One speaker Wednesday night urged the council to save both parcels from development.

City officials have said they don't consider Pine Meadow true open space, and say the proximity of Hidden Lakes Park a few blocks away negates the old golf course's value as parkland.

But council members and others have said Alhambra Highlands is more worthy of "saving," not yet developed in any way, and with some historical value.

"It has oak trees that were there before Europeans strolled onto this continent," said Bill Nichols of Martinez told the council Wednesday. "If you need a caretaker, I'm available."

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Purchase by Peninsula Open Space Trust

Farm preservation grows along coast

Deal keeps 96 acres of Brussels sprouts near Pescadero, state beach

By Paul Rogers

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A fledgling effort to preserve working farms is growing along San Mateo County's scenic coast with the addition of a 96-acre Brussels sprouts farm 3 miles south of Pescadero.

Providing scenic oceanfront views and sitting adjacent to a state beach along Highway 1, it's the kind of property that environmentalists in the past would have added to the state parks system. But the Peninsula Open Space Trust has purchased the Cordes property, located across Highway 1 from Bean Hollow State Beach, for \$3.3 million in the latest in a series of deals by the Palo Alto-based environmental group designed to preserve farming on the San Mateo coast and open opportunities for young farmers amid sky-high real estate prices.

Blair Friedeman, a spokeswoman for the Peninsula Open Space Trust, said the purchase is part of the organization's "Farmland Futures Initiative," which has a goal of raising \$25 million over 10 years to increase the number of farms on the San Mateo County coast protected from development from 11 to 33 and from 750 acres to 2,250 acres.

Since launching the effort at the beginning of this year, the group has purchased four farms totaling 153 acres so far, Friedeman said. Like the others, the plan for the latest purchase is to place a conservation easement on the title so most of the property can't be developed, with plans to sell it later at a price lower than what it would have sold for if it could have been developed for luxury homes. The land trust may also put a trail along the edge to help expand the California Coastal Trail.

The property is zoned for agriculture. Two homes could have been built on it under county rules.

"Now even if the property is sold, all of the natural values of it will be protected and most of it will stay in ag production forever," she said.

The farm was previously owned by Richard Cordes, a Walnut Creek real estate investor. Cordes, 55, said he bought the property a decade ago as an investment, and came to love the area.

"From just about any place you have a 180-degree view of the Pacific Ocean," he said. "You hear the seals. It's just a spectacular plateau, with prime soils. It's beautiful."

Cordes said he and his family received offers in recent years from wealthy individuals who wanted to purchase the property to build a large home or two. But he said he wanted the land — which has only one small shed on it now — to continue being farmed by the Marchi family, a third-generation San Mateo coast farming family that leases the land and grows Brussels sprouts, leeks and fennel there. Under the deal, the Marchi family will continue to lease and work the property.

The adjacent park, Bean Hollow State Beach, was acquired by the state parks system in 1958 and although rural with few amenities, it is known for its colorful stones and tide pools rich with anemones, crabs and sea urchins.



The Peninsula Open Space Trust has bought the 96-acre Cordes property, a farm near Bean Hollow State Beach on the San Mateo County coast. The property will continue to be farmed.

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The Sacramento Bee/California Forum

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Here's how Metropolitan Water District can be good Delta neighbor

Delta interests are concerned about the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California buying islands in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Manny Crisosotomo Sacramento Bee file

By Mary Nejedly Piepho
Special to The Bee

Now that Metropolitan Water District of Southern California has completed its \$175 million purchase of four islands in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, totaling almost 20,000 acres in size, it is time to engage in a discussion of how Met can be a good Delta neighbor.

Delta interests are rightly concerned about the presence of Met in our midst. The overpumping of the Delta by water contractors, led by Met, has had a negative impact on Delta water quality for farms and wildlife. The proposed twin tunnels, largely advocated by Met, will have monumental negative impacts on Delta communities and farms near the construction sites, and will create a massively expensive infrastructure that could only be paid for by the continuation, and perhaps even the acceleration, of the overpumping from the Delta. This is contrary to state law, which requires a reduced reliance on water from the Delta.

It's also worth noting that the proposed twin tunnel alignment passes through two of the four islands that Met has just purchased. This serves to facilitate the disastrous twin tunnel project, part of the Delta plan that a Sacramento judge recently ruled invalid.

Met gets the benefit of the doubt that it has not yet decided the use of the four islands, as claimed in court proceedings. With the purchase complete, Met's attention will certainly focus on how it will use this new asset to advance its interests in the Delta.

With or without the tunnels, it is certainly possible that Met's use of the islands can either do no harm or even be positive for the Delta.

For starters, Met could agree to pay its taxes and assessments, which are necessary for local governments (both counties and reclamation districts) to ensure continued road improvements on these islands and improvement to the critical levee system. As a public agency, Met is not obligated to pay all of these amounts. As a good and responsible neighbor, Met certainly should.

Met should also agree to participate as a member of the Delta levee community, acknowledging that Delta levees work as a system necessary to maintain levees not only on these four Delta islands but throughout the Delta, and not take actions that would undermine levees on adjoining

islands. Delta levees in this area are critical for ensuring movement of fresh water through the Delta to the south Delta export pumps.

Met should adopt the proposed California Department of Water Resources “good neighbor” policies that minimize the impact of restoration projects on nearby agricultural operations. Agriculture is the primary economic driver in the Delta and the surrounding region, and it is critically important that any restoration activity on these islands minimizes the impact on nearby agriculture.

Much of the Delta islands are deeply subsided as a result of their peat soils and century-old farming practices. There are promising methods in the Delta to halt and even reverse subsidence, and Met would have a vast canvas with these islands to test these methods.

Met has the ability to usher in a new beginning in its troubled history with the Delta. With proper management of these properties, Met can advance its own interest in restoring the Delta, sustaining the continued use of the Delta and maintaining the Delta as one of the largest estuaries in the Western Hemisphere.

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How Proposed Transportation Sales Tax Will Impact Lamorinda

By Nick Marnell

The Board of Supervisors July 12 approved the expenditure plan of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority, paving the way for a countywide one-half cent sales tax measure to appear on the November ballot. The plan proposes funding for several high-profile projects in the Lamorinda area. Since 1988 the dollars generated through voter-approved sales tax measures C and J, and administered by the CCTA, have funded a wide variety of major Contra Costa County transportation projects, notably the Caldecott Tunnel's Fourth Bore. The current Measure J half-cent sales tax, in effect through 2034, will generate approximately \$2.5 billion. If the new half-cent sales tax measure is approved, it will bring in an additional \$2.9 billion through 2047.

The expenditure plan provides for funding over five major areas, including transit, major highway corridors, local streets and roads, the environment, and the safe transportation of children, seniors and people with disabilities.

"It took a lot of compromise among many, many groups and organizations to bring us to where we are today," Board Chair Candace Andersen said.

In order for a jurisdiction to receive its share of the funds generated by the proposed sales tax, it must meet a long list of criteria, including the adoption of a development approval process that supports transit, bicycle and pedestrian access. Each jurisdiction must also demonstrate reasonable progress in providing housing opportunities for all income levels, and must maintain growth within clear urban limits.

"You want the voters' money, these are the rules," said Don Tatzin, Lafayette city council member and CCTA commissioner. A public oversight committee will make sure that the rules are followed. Officials of the Lamorinda communities outlined what the money from this proposed tax measure will provide for their jurisdictions.

Moraga

Benefits to Moraga residents include more than \$400,000 for local street and road maintenance over the life of the proposed measure, according to Ellen Clark, town planning director. The plan will also provide funding for pedestrian and bicycle projects throughout town, for enhanced transit service and for the Lamorinda School Bus program, which eliminates 3,000 automobile trips every school day. "Major streets projects like the new roundabouts planned along St. Mary's Road could also be funded with the measure," Clark said.

Orinda

"BART is a huge piece, because residents want access to BART," said Amy Worth, Orinda city council member and CCTA commissioner. BART, however, will not receive proceeds from the sales tax measure until it meets contingencies, which include spending on its own infrastructure and funding by Alameda and San Francisco counties. Money will also go toward the design of direct access to eastbound Highway 24, the city's bicycle and pedestrian master plan, and the maintenance of Orinda roads. Worth said that the plan will address increased demand for senior services, as seniors wish to be able to age in place in Lamorinda.

Lafayette

Tatzin also led off with BART, noting that Lafayette residents are big users of the system, with money from the proposed tax allocated to increased capacity and ridership. Also planned is improvement of traffic and pedestrian flow and bicycle access in the downtown.

"We want to make the portion of Mt. Diablo Boulevard west to Acalanes Road a more attractive route," Tatzin said. A bicycle trail along the East Bay Municipal Utility District aqueduct is also on the docket.

Not only did all of the 19 county jurisdictions support the expenditure plan, every member of each of the governing bodies voted yes. Orinda endorsed the plan in May, Moraga and Lafayette in June.

Having been approved by the Board of Supervisors, the plan returns to the CCTA board for approval, then back to the supervisors for adoption of an ordinance allowing the sales tax measure to be placed on the November ballot, where it must garner two-thirds of the vote for passage. "We have taken into consideration the needs of various interests, and we think this is going to be saleable to the public," said Supervisor Federal Glover, also a CCTA commissioner.

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Weil Will Not Run for Reelection in November

By Nick Marnell



Longtime MOFD director Fred Weil, second from left, has been an advocate for fairness. Photo Nick Marnell

costs, Weil warned that properly running the district came first.

"He did a solid job helping our district through good times and bad times, and he always treated us fairly," said firefighters' union representative Mark DeWeese.

Weil often criticizes what he perceives to be sloppy performance, including that of other public agencies. He lashed out at PG&E for what he termed an inadequate response to the sinkhole that disrupted Moraga in March. Weil blamed Contra Costa County leadership for the collapse of fire station 46, a joint venture with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District that was estimated to save the district \$1 million a year in operating costs. Even so, Supervisor Candace Andersen praised Weil's "commitment to MOFD and strong desire to keep the citizens of Moraga and Orinda safe."

"Fred will be a tough act to follow," said long-time fellow board member John Wyro.

Weil does have his detractors. A grassroots group faulted Weil for his part in the improper calculation of Fire Chief Peter Nowicki's pension in 2009, costing the district millions of dollars over the chief's retirement period, and in 2015 demanded Weil's ouster from the board. "As long as he remains a member of the MOFD board, his judgment will be questioned," said Steve Cohn, group spokesman. Cohn declined to comment on Weil's announcement.

"I have enjoyed this immensely," Weil said. "Whoever my successor will be, I hope will enjoy the opportunities as much as I have."

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Moraga-Orinda Fire District director Fred Weil stunned the audience at the July 20 district board meeting when he announced that he will not seek reelection to his Division 2 seat in November.

"It is important that a board member be fully committed to a four-year term without distraction, and I am not in a position to do that," said Weil, citing personal reasons for his decision.

Weil has served on the district board since 2003 and has long advocated for excellence in the MOFD service model and for fairness in dealings with district residents and its employees. He pushed for a competitive wage for the firefighters and he balked at any mention of service cutbacks, even once lecturing the board that it was more focused on saving money than on providing long-term service. As recently as June, as the board listened to a presentation on prefunding district retirement