

Letters to the Editor

Questions regarding MOFD underfunding

The Weekly has reported on the magnitude of unfunded employee retirement benefits by the area's public agencies. It has also reported a morale issue at MOFD because some Directors wish to use revenue to cure the pension and retiree medical plans' underfunding. If this is true, employee expectations are unrealistic.

I have been following MOFD's finances for a decade and make the following observations:

* Since MOFD was formed 20 years ago, its tax revenue has increased from \$9 million to \$23 million, a 150 percent increase, more than twice as much as inflation (66 percent).

* The latest audited financials show MOFD with \$71 million in underfunded retirement benefits. This assumes that the plans' assets will earn 7% in the future. The reason that the plans are underfunded is that their assets have not been able to earn at that rate. If a more realistic rate, 6%, was assumed, MOFD retirement plans would be underfunded by about \$100 million.

* For MOFD to have paid the salaries and benefits and to have fully funded the retirement benefits promised to the employees over the past 20 years, its revenue would have had to increase to \$32 million by now, 3.5 times what it was in 1997 when MOFD was formed. That would be four times what inflation has increased. That is what its employee compensation policies have actually cost the taxpayers.

* The increase in revenue has mostly gone to increases in employee compensation as this accounts for 85% of the MOFD budget.

* We currently have the same level of service (17 firefighters in five stations) as we did when MOFD was formed.

If MOFD's employee morale is low because they are concerned that they will not be able to see past increases repeated over the next 20 years as we pay off the debts of the past 20 years, they need to question who asked for those past increases and why the community does not deserve to share in the benefits of increased revenue going forward.

Steve Cohn
Orinda

The root of the problem with PG&E tree removal

Last week PG&E provided a "Pipeline Information for the City of Lafayette" document to residents with outstanding questions about gas pipeline safety operations in Lafayette. It's important to note that this information is incomplete and there are significant questions yet to be answered. PG&E should know that their responsibility and commitment to an open community forum must be satisfied prior to any tree removal. Yes, the report includes many details, but even these beg more questions.

Save Lafayette Trees brought a CEQA lawsuit against the City of Lafayette and PG&E because we believe the CPSI agreement that the City made without prior notice to residents is unlawful. Save Lafayette Trees is endorsed by the Lafayette Homeowners Council, Sustainable Lafayette, and the Mt. Diablo Audubon Society. These organizations represent thousands of citizens, many of whom are contributing to this lawsuit. We are asking the City to rescind the agreement.

PG&E has a goal to build trust with customers. Residents question the integrity of the CPSI program. If the City were to rescind the agreement and PG&E would accept the rescission, the community could collaborate with our City leaders and PG&E on ensuring pipeline safety now and for the future while effectively preserving our natural environment. This collaboration would build our trust.

Residents need to know that PG&E plans on removing trees but will be leaving their roots in place. The CPSI claim is that roots could potentially lead to corrosion. PG&E's own survey makes no distinction between potential impact of live or dead tree roots on pipeline integrity. The pictures PG&E presents of tree roots wrapped around pipeline shows segments that were fully excavated. That will not be the case in Lafayette and it's not been the case in CPSI tree removals across the state. If you are a resident who has made an agreement with PG&E to have your trees removed and have any second thoughts, we recommend you contact PG&E to ask if you can rescind (recall) your agreement. You may also contact us at savelafayettetrees@gmail.com and we will gladly assist you.

Gina and Michael Dawson
Lafayette

Hurricane Harvey and climate change

Hurricane Harvey, an "unprecedented storm," was unequivocally enhanced by global warming in three ways.

First, sea levels are 7 inches higher than they were 100 years ago. And the rate of increase is accelerating. This increases flooding by raising the baseline for rivers and water running off of the land. It also increases the height of hurricane storm surges of sea water onto the land.

Second, the ocean is warmer. More than 90 percent of the warming that has happened on Earth over the past 50 years has occurred in the ocean. During Harvey, Gulf ocean temperatures were 3 to 7 degrees above average. Hurricanes feed off heat from the water. When the ocean heats up, it turns into water vapor. As water vapor rises, it cools, condenses into rain, and releases heat that creates the spiraling winds.

And third, the air itself is warmer. 2016 was the warmest year since records began in 1880. And the rate of increase in air temperature is also accelerating. Warmer air holds more moisture than cooler air and that increases rainfall intensity. More than 50 inches of rain were recorded for Harvey.

We can't say Harvey wouldn't have happened but for global warming. We can say that this hurricane was enhanced by global warming, which is caused by our continuing use of fossil fuels. "Unprecedented" storms have become the new normal and will become more severe in the future as these three enhancing factors continue to increase.

Climate chaos resulting from global warming is right up there with nuclear annihilation among threats to the survival of humanity. The current rate of change in the earth's climate and species extinction is explosive in geologic time.

Climate change is a choice that our government and the fossil fuel industry are making. The longer we continue this dangerous "experiment" with the earth's climate, the harder it will become to control, much less reverse. It is imperative now that our elected officials stand up against climate denial and demand that the Administration and Congress commit to long-term climate action to avoid the impending climate chaos.

Call and write your members of Congress. See <https://www.climate.gov/#understandingClimate> for more information. Join local action groups, such as Citizen's Climate Lobby (<https://citizensclimatelobby.org/>), <https://350.org/>, and Orinda Progressive Action Alliance (<http://orindaprogressives.wixsite.com/opaa>) and on facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/626446120888654/>).

Jim Ulrick
Orinda

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