

BAY AREA MONITOR



A Publication of the League of Women Voters of the Bay Area

February/March 2021 • Volume 46, Number 4

End of the Trail

Announcing the
Discontinuation of the
Monitor Print Magazine



LWVBA Contemplates Digital Future of the *Monitor*

Let's start with this request: Sign up for *Monitor Notes*, our weekly e-mail newsletter, at bayareamonitor.org/subscribe.

Because yes, as announced on our cover, the League of Women Voters of the Bay Area intends to discontinue printing the *Bay Area Monitor*. After this edition, we have two remaining: one in April and one in June. The one in June will be the last of the current fiscal year, and the last of our 46th publication year. And with our funding running out, it just makes sense for it to be the last ever.

We foreshadowed this possibility last spring, right after the pandemic hit — although as we indicated then, the coronavirus does not shoulder the bulk of the blame for our pending discontinuation. Print publications and nonprofits have suffered since the global financial crisis of 2007, and even prior to that, really. The *Monitor* has a foot in both of those realms, so its struggles are not particularly surprising.

We can save a significant amount of money if we no longer pay printing and mailing costs. What's more, we've seen a large increase in our e-mail subscription sign-ups, which are up 30 percent in the past 12 months. It appears that the internet is the most viable place for this publication to live.

To be clear, we do not anticipate providing the full *Monitor* magazine experience online. There is a possibility that we can offer longform articles, but those would be unlikely to come packaged together in a magazine layout, even an electronic one. Many details remain to be ironed out, but we can say with some certainty that our weekly e-mail newsletter — with its lower production costs, condensed coverage, and more frequent publishing schedule — stands as our most sustainable option going forward.

So, again: Sign up for *Monitor Notes*.

For as our front cover of this edition acknowledges, the *Monitor* magazine is reaching the end of the trail, and like the image on our back cover, it will soon become history. Those covers relate to Aleta George's page 10 article on layered trails, with her own photo featuring the new Patwino Worrtla Kodoi Dihi Open Space Park in Solano County, and the Richmond Museum of History's photo capturing the Point Molate Chinese shrimp camp circa 1870 - 1912.

Our other articles for this edition include a look at an elegant fix for Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta problems by Robin Meadows, an examination of small transit operator responses to the pandemic by Cecily O'Connor, and consideration of how low-income residents can be better included in the environmental movement to increase home energy efficiency by Leslie Stewart.

Leslie's article links up with our topic for this year's Bay Area League Day, which grapples with social inequality and how to confront it (*announcement above right*). We hope

Attend Bay Area League Day 2021

EQUITY IN ACTION

Saturday, March 6

9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.



The League of Women Voters confirmed its support for diversity, equity, and inclusion principles during its national convention last June. The COVID-19 emergency lays bare how the most vulnerable among us continue to be hit the worst. Have you wondered how to determine if your local community is doing all it should to implement equity? How we can create a more equitable economy? Our annual educational day for 2021 focuses on tools and measurements that implement equity and further our goals for a just and inclusive society. We end with comments by Stephanie Doute (*pictured*), CEO of the League of Women Voters of California. Watch *Monitor Notes* for registration details.

you'll attend the virtual convening of this annual event.

While we're making announcements, we thank those readers who have contributed donations to the *Monitor* in recent months: Eric Arens, Dorie Behrstock, Janice Blumenkrantz, Elizabeth Brown, Nancy Burnett, Karen Butter, Kathleen Cha, Sally Faulhaber, Veda Florez, Bruce and Karen Joffe, Stella Kennedy, Joan Lautenberger, Jody London, Mischa Lorraine, Julie McDonald, Anne Ng, Sherry Smith, Alex Starr, Susan Schwartz, and David Vincent.

Oh, and one last thing: Sign up for *Monitor Notes*.

Alec MacDonald

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Published in August, October, December, February, April, and June, the Bay Area Monitor appears both in print and online at www.bayareamonitor.org. Distributed primarily in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area and Sacramento, the Monitor's readership consists mainly of elected and appointed officials, government staff, business and community leaders, nonprofit affiliates, library patrons, engaged residents, and League members. Subscriptions to the publication are free.

The Monitor's primary financial support comes from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. The publication also receives funding from advertising sponsors and through reader donations. The Monitor is nonpartisan, and operates with editorial autonomy.

A New Definition of Home Equity: Healthy Housing for All

By Leslie Stewart

Many Bay Area residents are addressing climate change by altering their purchasing habits, driving electric vehicles, and replacing natural gas appliances in homes. More are needed, though. “Early adopters” are important to get trends started — they pilot the techniques and model them for others — but it takes more than early adopters to make changes on a scale that will really move the needle. Unfortunately, those who would benefit most are sometimes unable to join in at all.

According to the BayREN Energy Atlas, a database tool developed by the California Center for Sustainable Communities at UCLA, households in disadvantaged communities lag behind more affluent areas in adopting rooftop solar panels and electric vehicles. Some of these communities also show indications of lower energy use than is optimal for comfort and health, which UCLA researchers attribute to under-utilization of heat or air-conditioning due to the cost of paying for utilities. Nationwide, low-income families spend 20 percent of their monthly income on energy, compared to 3.5 percent in other households, according to the Green & Healthy Homes Initiative, a nonprofit which works to advance equity through safe and energy-efficient housing.

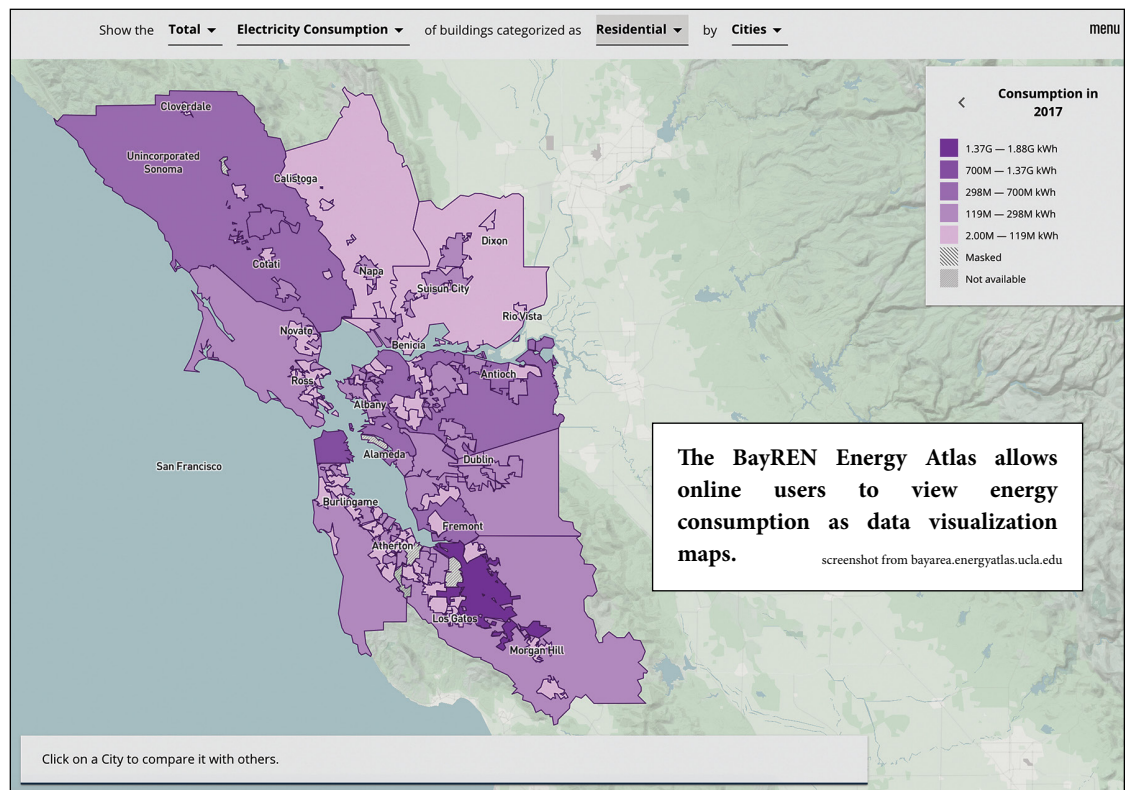
Low-income residents have been left out of the movement toward greater energy efficiency in several ways. People living in disadvantaged communities may not be included when energy efficiency programs are designed. They may not take advantage of incentive programs due to limited time, a mistrust of government agencies, or difficulties in accessing online opportunities. They may be unaware of changes they could make, or are unable to make such changes because they lack the resources or don't own the property where they live. For example, a family in a rented unit may have no opportunity to switch to solar power, even though that

would save on their electricity bill each month. There may be no money for insulation that would bring that bill down while keeping them more comfortable.

This is doubly unfortunate because often the impact of missing out on new technologies to improve energy efficiency affects more than finances. Health may also suffer, especially respiratory health, which is often linked to heart problems. Asthma, prevalent in disadvantaged communities, can be triggered by fumes from gas stoves or by smoke from wildfires or neighborhood fireplaces drawn into poorly-sealed homes.

In hot weather, homes without air-conditioning can create heat-stress illnesses for residents, particularly the elderly. Michael Kent of the Contra Costa Health Services Department addressed this issue during a November forum held by BayREN, an Association of Bay Area Governments program focusing on regional efforts to save energy. Kent noted that in Contra Costa, with the exception of the affluent retirement community of Rossmore, a map of heat vulnerabilities lines up neatly with disadvantaged communities.

The result is that many residents spend more money to live in conditions that are less comfortable, less healthy, and more damaging to the environment. Weatherization programs are an excellent starting point for many households to reduce



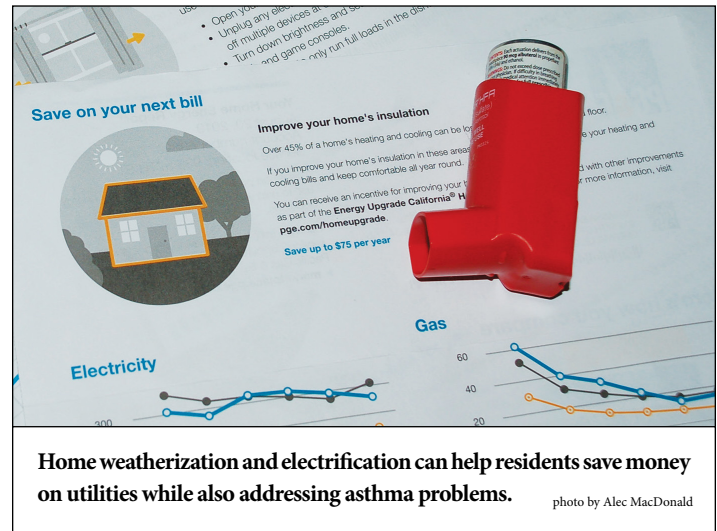
A New Definition of Home Equity (from page 3)

this burden; adding insulation and sealing cracks can lead to immediate improvements, making heating and cooling more effective at a lower cost.

Utility bill assistance programs are often a gateway to accessing weatherization programs. This is one of the ways the nonprofit Community Action Marin assists low-income and underserved residents in Marin County; as part of its Safety Net Program, it distributes the county's LIHEAP (Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program) federal funding to help residents with unmanageable energy bills. Safety Net Services Director Laurel Hill told the BayREN forum audience that assistance for some rural residences may entail more than paying a bill. "If they're heating with wood, we tell them, 'We can get you a cord of wood.'" With partner agency MCE Healthy Homes, Community Action Marin then works with residents to reduce future bills, through energy audits and referrals to a weatherization program provided by a second partner agency, San Francisco Peninsula Energy Services.

Hill noted that eligibility for Marin's energy assistance is based on the income of the resident, not that of landlords. However, landlords must consent to any property changes; some are reluctant to participate in the weatherization program, so it has been under-utilized.

The health benefits of weatherization are the focus of the Contra Costa County Asthma Initiative. In its pilot project, the asthma initiative trained home health nurses to evaluate weatherization needs in the households of patients who had recently visited an emergency room for asthma problems;



research has shown that asthma is correlated with both lower income levels and heat vulnerabilities. Kent then helped those households to apply to weatherization programs funded by LIHEAP and by state cap-and-trade funds earmarked for disadvantaged communities. As Kent described it, "The goal is to use preventive measures to save money on emergency room visits and hospitalizations." While helping the medical system cut expenditures, these measures also ease residential utility bills and reduce additional health episodes for asthma patients.

The asthma initiative has recently received a three-year grant from the California Department of Health Services through the Sierra Health Foundation to do 150 in-home asthma assessments. As needed, households will be provided with asthma prevention modifications and supplies, and also matched up with weatherization programs. A one-year grant from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District will fund data collection and management, and will also cover electrification upgrades — such as range hoods or central air filtration — for approximately 38 of the first 50 households in order to improve indoor air quality and reduce greenhouse gases.

Electrification — moving to electric appliances powered by renewable energy — is the next step after weatherization, particularly for asthma patients, as fumes from natural gas heaters and stoves are often not vented adequately and are even more likely to create indoor air problems if a home is no longer drafty. The BayREN Home+ program provides rebates and other incentives to homeowners and landlords to encourage them to upgrade to more energy-efficient electric heating, air-conditioning, and appliances.

Kent said that the money part of the asthma initiative

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has been complicated. One problem has been “siloe” funding, with eligibility requirements and covered programs differing by funder. For example, if a leaky roof is creating mold problems that exacerbate asthma, money from a weatherization program may not be sufficient, and if the project isn’t eligible for a program for disadvantaged communities, that leaves a gap between need and solution. Grants are also not a long-term, stable basis for a program that needs to serve far more than a few hundred households.

The Contra Costa program has encountered the same reluctance by landlords to participate as in Marin. Kent mentioned an Antioch resident who needed to get air-conditioning following a hospitalization for heat sickness. Without insulation, new air-conditioning would be extremely expensive to maintain. However, insulation could not be installed without a wiring upgrade, which the landlord was unwilling to complete.

Landlords’ decisions are also a constraint on overcoming disparities in use of solar energy. The California Center for Sustainable Communities at UCLA has faced this on a project to get a low-income community to net-zero energy use by creating a community solar facility, among other strategies. Eric Fournier, research director at the Center, explained to BayREN forum participants, “You have the issue of ‘agency’ — renters are not in control of many of the housing factors, such as retrofits, solar, and battery storage.”

Residents are not always ready to change, either. The Center began with building community awareness of the advantages to making the changes, such as comfort, lower bills, and better air quality. Fournier stressed that it’s also important to build trust, whether by promising and delivering local jobs as part of the project, or speaking the language of the people who will benefit.

A growing number of programs are available to improve energy efficiency in communities that have been lagging in participation. Elemental Accelerator, with a base in East Palo Alto, invests in nonprofits working on equity-building projects, including solar energy, in “frontline communities” — the predominantly low-income and minority communities with pollution burdens that feel the impacts of climate change first. GRID, a national nonprofit, installs solar projects, including battery storage, that serve low-income households and communities. The accomplishments of all of these programs will benefit both individuals and the environment. 

Leslie Stewart covers air quality and energy for the Monitor.

Road to Recovery

By Cecily O’Connor



LAVTA suspended fare collection at the beginning of the pandemic to minimize contact between drivers and riders. photo courtesy LAVTA

After adapting to hardships driven by the coronavirus pandemic last year, the Bay Area’s small transit agencies are still facing bumps in the road.

COVID-19 vaccine distribution is expected to help smooth the path toward recovery, while forthcoming funding will relieve budgets and manage transitions from the current slump. But these measures don’t immunize local operators from a substantive challenge: When will Bay Area residents return in earnest to offices and in-person learning?

Ridership demand is “still very hard to predict,” said Nancy Whelan, general manager at Marin Transit.

This dilemma affects transit agencies of all sizes, but small operators serving small Bay Area communities — where students or older populations are a big part of ridership — have to be particularly nimble.

“Before the pandemic, we operated three routes: two fixed and one dial-a-ride,” said Brandon Thomson, general manager of the Delta Breeze in Rio Vista, a Solano County city where nearly half the population is over age 65. “When the shelter-in-place order was issued, we modified Route 52 [a BART station feeder] and only operate that if there’s demand. And the hours dedicated to that route were shifted to dial-a-ride.”

In interviews with the *Monitor*, Thomson and other transit managers recounted the flurry of service adjustments their agencies made when COVID-19 emerged, and discussed the ways their agencies are continuing to refine how to

continued on page 6

Road to Recovery (from page 5)

approach planning and operations issues moving forward.

To trim costs, they cut routes to schools and business parks made vacant by mid-March shelter-in-place orders. To slow the coronavirus's spread, they invested in new safety and cleaning measures. In some cases, they waived fares to limit driver-passenger contact. They also limited how many passengers could ride at once, to allow sufficient space onboard for social distancing.

The Wheels Bus system run by the Livermore Amador Valley Transit Authority (LAVTA) is losing \$500,000 a month that "we would otherwise have if it weren't for the pandemic," said Executive Director Michael Tree. Ridership dropped 90 percent the week of March 16, forcing elimination of one-quarter of its service, mainly school and commuter routes. Marin Transit suffered an 80 percent ridership drop across all services at the pandemic's peak. It eliminated routes serving schools and the Muir Woods shuttle.

"To meet distancing requirements, we were passing people up," Whelan said. "So we added service, which meant more frequent service on the most heavily traveled routes."

Since March, Marin Transit's ridership has rebounded slightly, down 60 percent compared to last year. But fare revenue for fiscal year 2020-2021 is on track to fall by \$1.6 million, due in part to suspended services. Going forward, Marin Transit expects "some drop in demand because if people can telecommute they may continue to do that, or [at least] on a partial basis," Whelan said, citing survey results.

The East Bay's County Connection experienced driver absenteeism and dropped routes, including those serving

BART and the Bishop Ranch Business Park. Ridership on fixed routes bottomed out at 15 percent in March, and is now about 30 to 35 percent of where it was about a year ago. The system lost \$1.2 million through December.

Sonoma County Transit reduced its schedule to "Saturday-level" service, equating to roughly 56 percent of its pre-COVID-19 service hours, said Transit Systems Manager Bryan Albee. It has since brought back some routes, operating about 70 percent of what it did before the coronavirus. It also ended a 10-month fare collection hiatus on February 1.

Even as they grapple with these disturbances, transit managers said the tough situation has actually created an opportunity to view systems through a new lens and start better service plans. They want to create a rider experience that's fair, efficient, connected, and may help propel them out from under the current crunch.

"This is an opportunity to do things differently than we have in the past, which is something we all should be looking at," Albee said.

"General managers from all the agencies, both large and small, meet once a week, so there is a lot more sharing of information," Whelan added.

Service, schedule, and mobility improvements could be among the coronavirus's lasting effects. Sonoma County Transit is exploring fare system changes by simplifying the number of fare zones and charging a flat rate for inner-city service. It also wants to shift to a seven-day schedule instead of a weekday and weekend approach on intercity routes. The City of Rio Vista is planning to pilot micro-transit services,

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while County Connection recently began a paratransit “One Seat Regional Ride” that eliminates transfers across several service areas. Bus Wheels is building “rate-your-ride” features into a customer app. LAVTA also is testing an autonomous vehicle that’ll eventually carry passengers between the Dublin/Pleasanton BART station and nearby locations.

Marin Transit is enhancing its equity and social justice policies and practices, as staff are creating an equity statement to present to the board of directors in March, in addition to drafting a work plan integrating equity, diversity, and inclusion across all functions of the organization. One area of focus is developing a better understanding about community mobility

and transportation concerns. The agency is also considering fare policy improvements so trips are more equitable and cost-effective for low-income and special-needs riders.

Lastly, Marin Transit, Sonoma County Transit, and Bus Wheels are in various stages of transitioning fleets to zero-emission buses.

The regional revival framework is intended to come from the Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) created the group last spring to guide the future of the Bay Area’s public transportation network. It’s made up of more than 30 elected officials, business and labor groups, advocates, and public transit managers. Marin Transit’s Whelan and LAVTA’s Michael Tree are both members.

The task force’s focus is development of a “transformation action plan” and four related goals. One is to advance equity, in part by acknowledging disparities and investing equitably. The pandemic highlighted gaps between people who rely solely on public transit and those who have other choices, like car commuting or working from home.

Another area of planning is network management and governance reforms. The task force is in the early stages of fleshing out options, including defining problems and

reviewing roles and responsibilities, said MTC spokesperson John Goodwin in an e-mail.

There have been various policy ideas and efforts introduced since the 1970s to advance regional transportation connectivity, underscoring coordination difficulties among more than two dozen operators. But one idea under consideration now is


creation of a network manager.

“The task force will focus on discussing what a network manager is and should be,” Goodwin said. “It’s not yet clear when or even how the task force will take up the issue of recommending who should play the role of network manager.”

Related considerations like legislation, organizational decisions, interagency

coordination, funding, and new commission policies might be on the table, too, depending on how recommendations unfold.

In the meantime, MTC staff have been meeting regularly with transit operators, including a subgroup of small systems who’ve sent letters to the task force to consider specific concerns like revenue needs. Local transit received a collective \$1.3 billion in CARES Act funding last year, which was divvied up among individual agencies by MTC. An additional lifeline, \$975 million from the federal stimulus package approved in December, will soon be distributed by MTC to operators in the San Francisco-Oakland, San Jose, and Santa Rosa metro areas.

New federal funding and additional to-be-determined amounts from the Federal Transit Administration will ultimately be distributed to all Bay Area transit agencies, Goodwin said. California’s portion of FTA funds is received and allocated by Caltrans. Anyone wishing to follow transit recovery can virtually attend task force meetings, or receive updates via local operator board meetings. MTC is planning public polling this spring to learn how residents feel about returning to transit, Goodwin said. 

Cecily O’Connor covers transportation for the Monitor.



Sonoma County Transit recently added two new all-electric buses in a transition toward a zero-emission fleet.

photo courtesy Sonoma County Transportation & Public Works

New Delta Carbon Market Could Boost Bay Area Water Security

By Robin Meadows



A tractor works in a subsided corn field on Staten Island in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

photo courtesy The Nature Conservancy in California

Hundreds of thousands of people in the Bay Area get their water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, but this vital source is imperiled. Islands in the heart of the Delta have lost so much soil — literally tons — that they have sunk far below sea level, weakening the levees that protect them. Levee breaks would flood the islands, pulling in brine from the San Francisco Bay and rendering the water too salty to drink. Now, a new state program aims to reverse subsidence in the Delta and so help secure its water supply.

“That’s really exciting — they need to do something,” said Cindy Kao, who manages imported water for the Santa Clara Valley Water District. “Water from the Delta is really important to the Bay Area, we’re very dependent on it.” This water begins as snowmelt in the Sierra Nevada and then rushes down mountain streams and into mighty rivers that run hundreds of miles to their confluence in the Delta, along the border of Contra Costa and Solano counties. Kao’s agency, which serves nearly two million people, imports about 40 percent of its water from the Delta. In addition, half a million people in Contra Costa County use Delta water. The Delta also provides water to Central Valley farmers as well as 27 million people in Central Valley and Southern California communities.

The Delta was a vast wetland — 1,000 square miles of tidal and freshwater marsh — until European settlers drained it for farming. This conversion to agriculture created about one hundred islands surrounded by 2,250 miles of levees, and was complete by the 1930s. Land in a big chunk of the central Delta

has been sinking ever since. While soil on the edges of the Delta is largely minerals from weathered rocks, soil on the interior islands is peat from decaying wetland plants. When peat soil is drained and exposed to air, microbes break down this bulky organic matter, combining it with oxygen to form carbon dioxide. This peat loss causes two problems: carbon escapes into the atmosphere, and soil in the central Delta shrinks.

“It’s losing up to an inch and a half a year,” said Campbell Ingram, who directs the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy, a state agency dedicated to environmental and economic protection in the Delta. “There’s a big hole in the middle of the Delta — 200,000 acres — that’s up to 20 to 30 feet deep.” And this, Ingram continued, causes another problem: “The big hole is basically a bathtub that’s waiting to be filled.”

Levee breaks are all it would take to fill this enormous hole in the ground with salty water from the San Francisco Bay, and a moderate earthquake is all it would take to break levees in the central Delta. This is because they’re doing a job they were never meant to do. “We call them levees but they’re actually dams,” Ingram explained. “They’re holding water back 365 days a year.” When the levees were built, the water pushing against them from the outside was counterbalanced by land supporting them from inside. As the land has subsided, however, that inside support has vanished.

The Delta Conservancy has launched a new initiative aimed at fixing all these problems — carbon emissions, soil subsidence, and water security — at the same time. Called

the Delta Carbon Program, the initiative entails a two-pronged solution. First, subsided islands are flooded, protecting them from the air and so arresting further soil and carbon loss. Then the newly inundated islands are re-vegetated with water-loving plants that rebuild peat, reversing subsidence and so reducing the risk of levee failure.

This is not a quick fix; peat grows at roughly the same rate it subsides, up to two inches per year. That said, if the program takes off, it will boost water security slowly but surely. “In 40 years we could bring the risk to zero,” Ingram said. This may seem like a long time, he adds, but it also took decades for the Delta islands to get so astonishingly far below sea level. Moreover, our current do-nothing approach means that “every year we’re going the wrong direction.”

Rebuilding peat also has the benefit of sequestering carbon, opening the way to pay for the Delta Conservancy’s solution to the long-standing problem of subsidence and its threat to water security in the Delta. The California Department of Water Resources recently restored 1,700 acres of tidal marsh on Sherman and Twitchell islands in the Delta, and this is now the first wetland in the world approved to sell carbon credits that others can buy to offset their greenhouse gas emissions.

Given that most of the Delta is farmed, large-scale wetland restoration on all that deeply subsided land is unlikely. But there is also an agricultural option. The Nature Conservancy is planting rice, which grows in flooded fields, to address subsidence on Staten Island. Not to be confused with the island of the same name in New York City, the Delta’s Staten Island is a showcase of wildlife-friendly farming: most of its 9,200 acres produce corn and other crops that provide income to farmers as well as food to birds migrating down the Pacific Flyway. Notably, about 5,000 sandhill cranes winter on Staten Island, feasting on grains left over from harvest. While wonderful for birds, current crops require the dry soil that leads to subsidence. Growing corn, for example, entails draining a root zone that is four feet deep. “The carbon just blows away,” Ingram said. “It blasts off into the atmosphere.”


The Nature Conservancy is converting Staten Island’s corn to rice. Besides addressing subsidence, rice will continue to provide income to farmers and residual grain to birds. “The



Sandhill cranes forage for food in irrigated pastures of the Delta.

photo courtesy The Nature Conservancy in California

goal is to make the Delta sustainable,” said the nonprofit organization’s Dawit Zeleke, who manages Staten Island. Ultimately, this will mean getting a good price for the carbon credits generated from rebuilding peat soil.

“The carbon market is very important,” Zeleke said. “If we want landowners to participate, there need to be incentives for family farmers who are trying to survive.” 

Robin Meadows covers water for the Monitor.



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Forging Layered Trails of History

By Aleta George

Most trails in the Bay Area have stories to tell, with histories that deepen our experience of the land we walk on. The trails that effectively communicate and interpret history offer the best opportunity for users to experience a layered trail. One of the best examples winds through the Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, where the San Francisco Bay Trail is further animated by interpretive signs, a memorial, a website with historical content, and a smartphone audio tour. Although currently not an option due to the pandemic, history can also be gleaned at the museum, on tours with docents, or on a Victory ship.

It's a challenge to convey the history of a place to all users of trails, be they history buffs or those out for fresh air and exercise. Here are three examples of organizations currently brainstorming and developing ways to tackle that challenge.

Construction will begin this year on a new 2.5-mile section of the San Francisco Bay Trail from the eastern foot of the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge up to Point Molate. Once the trail is open to the public, it will be a prime example of a trail animated by cultural history. Imagine that you are walking on that new trail with the past layered beneath your feet. The deepest layer is the Ohlone and Miwok people who lived on the land for thousands of years. Above that layer is the Spanish Colonial Era and Rancho San Pablo. Hovering over that is the Gold Rush, and then a thriving Chinese shrimp camp where Point Molate Beach Park is today. The Winehaven Historical District is a layer atop that, followed by a World War II Navy Fuel Depot. The most recent layer is the San Francisco Bay Trail itself, which tells the story of activists working to provide shoreline access to all. Fifty years ago, the public had access to only 65 feet of Richmond's shoreline, but with the completion of this trail there will be 20 miles of public access.

You can learn about the history of Richmond and its shoreline by going online, visiting the Richmond Museum of History (when it opens again), or by reading books such as Donald Bastin's *Richmond*. When the trail opens, it will have interpretive signs designed and installed by the East

Bay Regional Park District in collaboration with the City of Richmond and the Trails for Richmond Action Committee (TRAC). "With 32 miles of shoreline, Richmond's history is on the shore," said Bruce Beyaert, chair of TRAC, the nonprofit helping to open the trail. "In collaboration with others we have designed, produced, and installed about 50 interpretive and wayfinding signs on the Bay Trail in Richmond."

One of the challenges of interpreting history is that, unlike the crystallized minerals in geologic layers, histories shift over time. "The history taught to people is often reflective of the time period in which those histories are told," said

Martin Rizzo, historian for the Santa Cruz District of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Take for example the history of fire in Big Basin Redwood State Park in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The park is closed indefinitely due to last summer's CZU Lightning Complex Fire that burned through 90 percent of the park's 18,224 acres and destroyed most of its structures, including those built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1936.

While the destruction and closure are devastating, they also provide an opportunity to re-examine the interpretation of fire.

"Big Basin was born of fire, and redwoods are the stars of that story because they have evolved over the centuries to respond to fire as part of their world," said Julie Sidel, a park interpreter with the state parks department. A fire in 1899 led to the formation of the Sempervirens Fund and the founding of Big Basin, California's first state park. In 1904, the year the park opened, three fires burned at once, prompting a local newspaper to report a scene that we can relate to today: "a heavy pall of dense smoke settled down on our town, the sun a glaring disk of fire in the heavens but with its rays so intercepted by the smoke that it hardly casts a shadow."

Fire has been a consistent theme in the park's storytelling. Sidel and other docents referred to fire-damaged trees on the Redwood Loop Trail to discuss the natural history of the park, including the 1904 fires. But fire and its relationship



The San Francisco Bay Trail runs by the Rosie the Riveter Memorial in Richmond's Marina Park.

photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons

to the land goes much deeper than the turn of the 19th century, and staff at the state park want to deepen its igneous storytelling. For at least 13,000 years, indigenous people used fire to manage resources and control large fires. The village site for the Quiroste tribe that lived in the Big Basin area was Achistaca. “This tribe was the largest and most powerful of the local Ohlone tribes, and their homelands stretched from Año Nuevo up into the redwoods of Big Basin,” said Rizzo, who specializes in Santa Cruz, Monterey Bay, and San Francisco Bay Area native peoples.

During the Spanish Colonial Era, the missionaries forbade the tribes from setting controlled fires, leaving unwanted fuel on the ground that has accumulated for centuries. In recent years, the state parks department has been working with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and other tribes to learn the indigenous techniques of prescribed fires. The Amah Mutsun and Muwekma Ohlone tribes claim the Quiroste as ancestral relatives, said Rizzo.

“The sunny side of the recent fires is the opportunity to tell these histories in new ways that reflect our values today, with a more inclusive understanding that recognizes the contributions of native peoples in particular,” said Rizzo.

The interpretation of fire has already changed over the last few decades; whereas Smokey Bear’s message focused only on fire suppression, the message today is more complex. “We still don’t want people to go out there and start fires,” Sidel said, “but we also want to convey a deeper understanding of the role of fire in land management in the history of California and the West, and to use science and history as a way to bring the concept of prescribed fire into broader acceptance.”


How they get that message across to people walking the trails once Big Basin opens is part of their challenge. One thing is certain: fire-scarred trees will help to illustrate the message. “Maybe we can help people accept fire management, and accept that fire-scarred trees are part of the natural world that we love,” said Sidel.

Further north in Solano County, Solano Land Trust is developing the stories that they want to tell on the trails of

a new 1,500-acre open space park (currently open only for docent-led tours). “This is the first property that I’ve worked on where we’ve had a comprehensive communication strategy,” said director Nicole Braddock. “We’re working on the signs that we want on the property, the stories we want to tell, and the different themes we want to hit.” The themes include wildlife, ranching, cultural history, and fire, and the planning committee has found that the ways of the indigenous people cross all of the themes.

To help tell stories on the trails (that are not yet officially named), Solano Land Trust is collaborating with the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, which provided a name for the new park. The official name of the park is Patwino Worrta Kodoi Dihi, which means Southern Rock Home of the Patwin People. “We want to honor the Patwin people by starting with renaming the property, and continuing with a partnership to tell stories of the land,” said Braddock. “Through the signage, and maybe through some of the trail names, we want people to come away knowing a handful of Patwin words. It’s really important to the Patwin people that they don’t lose their language.”

As these organizations ready their properties for public use and brainstorm ways to effectively create layered trails of history, you can engage with the concept by reading interpretive signs on trails at the Marin Headlands or in the Presidio of San Francisco, or by taking any number of audio tours on the San Francisco Bay Trail.

Once you’re on a trail, picture the layers of history below your feet, and with your imagination set the layers in motion. That is an animated trail of history, and you are part of it. 

To learn more or share trail planning ideas, contact Trails for Richmond Action Committee at tracbaytrail@earthlink.net for the Bay Trail to Point Molate, Martin Rizzo at Martin.Rizzo@parks.ca.gov for Big Basin, or Nicole Braddock at nicole@solanolandtrust.org for Patwino Worrta Kodoi Dihi.

Aleta George covers open space for the Monitor.



Mark Hylkema of the California Department of Parks and Recreation holds a fire-damaged sign from Big Basin State Park.

photo by Martin Rizzo

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