

BAY AREA MONITOR



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

June/July 2021 • Volume 46, Number 6

The Last Print Edition

The Monitor Transitions to an
Internet-Only Publication



Crossing into the Future

A few months after I started this job as editor of the *Bay Area Monitor* back in 2006, I joined a group of League members for a boat tour of the construction of the Bay Bridge. The new span wasn't even close to touching down on Yerba Buena Island yet, and the old span was still bustling with traffic, although from our vantage down on the water we couldn't actually see any vehicles. We did get quite an eyeful, however, taking in an astounding view from below. The juxtaposition of design from different eras was striking, with the bulky, boxy frame of the original bridge looking rather antiquated next to the sleek, seamless structure that would replace it.

Appearances aside, that old span served the region ably for nearly eight decades until the new span took over the job in 2013. No longer needed, the original bridge was then dismantled, and almost all traces of it are gone today except for a few pilings that were converted into an observational pier.

This, of course, is simply the way of the world, the past perpetually giving way to the future. The *Monitor* is not exempt from this cycle, and, as I've explained in recent editions, its own time for change has come. The League has distributed paper copies of the *Monitor* since 1975, but as we can no longer afford to do so, this edition represents the final one in print.

Our print legacy will not disappear like the old Bay Bridge; our archives can be perused at the San Francisco Public Library, and part of them will remain showcased at bayareamonitor.org, where we will continue to regularly post fresh coverage of the region in a reconfigured format. To lead this new iteration of the *Monitor*, I am pleased to announce that we have hired Michael Adamson, whose byline you might recognize from *ESTUARY News* magazine, an excellent regional publication that is similar to ours in many ways.

Michael has been helping us prepare for the transition for several months, and as we wrap up our last print edition, I am choosing this moment to step away and let him take the wheel. I intend to support the League and the *Monitor* in some small capacity down the line, but after 15 years at the helm, it is time for me to explore other pursuits.

I greatly appreciate having had the opportunity to manage this publication, and it has been an honor to serve the League. I have had the pleasure to work with many LWVBA board members over the years, serving directly under the supervision of the late Nikki Harris, former LWVBA president Marion Taylor, and current LWVBA president Sherry Smith. I am indebted to them all, and to every League member with whom I've collaborated.



A view of Bay Bridge construction on a tour with the League of Women Voters on December 7, 2006.

photo by Alec MacDonald

It has also been an honor to work with the *Monitor's* talented and industrious writers. Since the beginning, I've edited at least a dozen of them for this publication, but I am particularly proud of our current team that, as a whole, has been in place for the last five years. We took our first step in assembling a formal team when Robin Meadows came on board as our Water Education Initiative reporting fellow in 2014; she has shown unparalleled expertise covering water issues ever since. On the transportation beat, Cecily O'Connor has proven tireless in tracking down sources far and wide while also stepping up to produce our weekly *Monitor Notes* email newsletter. And Aleta George has championed conservation with a passion for all things wild that makes her so apt as an open space writer.

I want to express special gratitude to Leslie Stewart, who has rounded out the team by reporting on air quality and energy, but has also done so much more, and has been a part of this operation for far longer than I. Having preceded me as the previous *Monitor* editor, she has imparted indispensable knowledge and invaluable guidance that has helped keep this publication going, and she has pitched in to handle countless tasks, everything from accounting to proofreading.

When I consulted with Leslie about what to put on the cover of this final edition, she suggested the sun setting behind the Golden Gate Bridge as a way to signify the end of an era. Hoping to photograph this image from a unique angle, I recently hopped on a friend's boat and we headed out to the western edge of the bay. The weather did not cooperate for the desired shot, but finding myself once again beneath the Bay Bridge, I took some photos that closed the loop on

that 2006 construction tour, the new span now standing alone, serving the region ably as its predecessor once did. One of those photos is our back cover. For our front cover, I was lucky enough to receive a Golden Gate Bridge sunset photo from Ruby MacDonald, the outgoing LWV Berkeley-Albany-Emeryville president, and my mom (Thanks, Mom!).

This long list of thanks ends, as it should, with our readers. The League extends our appreciation to those who have recently provided financial donations: Hilary Glann, Sara Malaun, Sherry Smith, Alex Starr, Diana Stephens, and the Weigen Burch Charitable Fund. And to all our readers, we are so very grateful to have had you along for the ride, and we invite you to stay with us as we cross into a new digital future.

Alec MacDonald

Editor, *Bay Area Monitor*

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Stay Connected

The *Bay Area Monitor* will no longer be available in print, but you can still read it online. Visit bayareamonitor.org/subscribe to sign up for our email list, which will allow you to stay connected with our coverage and learn of new developments we have in store.

Keeping Pace with the Natural State of Things

By Michael Adamson

Around the end of 2019, a friend and I hiked the Skyline-to-Sea trail. The trail begins in Castle Rock State Park (where I spent many weekends in high school learning to rock climb), meanders along a ridgeline of the Santa Cruz mountains, descends into the heart of Big Basin Redwoods State Park, and finishes at Waddell Creek Beach on Highway 1. While hiking through Big Basin's old growth redwoods, I was struck by the quiet grandness of the forest. The trees were massive, but beneath their canopy the forest was quiet, a near complete stillness only interrupted by the sound of a stream descending through the tree roots on its way to the sea. It seemed timeless, as though the forest had remained in that same state for centuries, and would for centuries more.

A few weeks later, my friend left the Bay Area for a job in Maryland. A few months after that, the California State Parks closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. And in August of last year, wildfire ripped through Big Basin, destroying the park facilities and leaving the fate of the old growth forest in doubt.

The last half-decade of environmental reporting in California has taught me that change is not an inevitable, occasional occurrence — it is the natural state of things. Our charge isn't to resist it, reverse it, or control its speed. One might as well stop an earthquake by laying duct tape across the San Andreas Fault. Rather, I see our relationship to this changing planet as one of negotiating transitions, of building bridges from one reality to the next.


The pace of change can be difficult for a publication like the *Bay Area Monitor* to keep up with. Climate change science

evolves almost as quickly as an edition can be published. The entire country's understanding of social justice can be turned on its head in the time it takes to write an essay on the subject. A global pandemic can radically alter the economic landscape, change how we read, what we read, and the media in which we read it.

The *Monitor* has a prestigious history as a print publication carved by the hard work of its reporters and editorial staff, as well as the loyalty and passion of its readership. That won't change as the publication moves away from print. What it looks like as we transition to a digital-only product remains to be seen, but I can say

that quality of journalism and commitment to informing the Bay Area will be the foundations of this era-spanning bridge.

The Big Basin old growths survived the fire. Does that forest now hold the perfect silence I walked through almost two years ago? I can't say for certain as the trail is still closed, but I suspect that I would find only a fleeting resemblance there. That previous stillness was an anomaly; by forcing transition, the wildfire was the more natural state of things. And the true heart of the forest is whatever remains to connect the new reality to the last.

I look forward to sharing my passion for nature, for the Bay Area, and for honest journalism as we reshape the *Monitor* online. And to you, the reader, I promise that the heart of this forest will remain recognizable. 



Michael Adamson

photo by Melvin Kneip

Michael Adamson is the incoming editor of the Monitor. Reach him at michael@bayareamonitor.org.

Where to Next? Advocacy Group Charts Regional Transit Reform

By Cecily O'Connor

Since advocacy group Seamless Bay Area launched in 2018, it's been asking people what prevents them from using transit and if any changes would compel them to choose bus and rail more often.

Their list generally calls for more connected, reliable, cost-effective, and easy-to-pay for travel — requests that aren't necessarily unusual. But they are conversation pieces all the same that Seamless Bay Area keeps fresh at the transit reform table as officials chart the post-pandemic course forward.

Seamless Bay Area is pushing for changes to transform the region's fragmented public transit system into something more unified and equitable to help people commute and travel easily, regardless of the transit agency. Twenty-seven transit agencies operate regionally, yet there is no single entity responsible for coordinating the transportation system as a whole.

Sara Barz, Seamless Bay Area board director and founding member, described a common pain point with room for improv-

“The thing that made me crazy is that some people would not use Clipper on the bus and pay cash because they thought Clipper wouldn’t be accepted,” said Barz, summing up one rider’s overpayment mistake shared during a December forum on essential travelers’ needs.

Barz co-authored a 2015 SPUR report with Ratna Amin called *Seamless Travel* that highlighted concerns about the Bay Area’s “patchwork” approach to transit. It contained analysis and strategies that helped form Seamless Bay Area’s seven guiding principles. These include running transit as one easy-to-use system, putting riders first, and making transit equitable and accessible to all.

“There was a position in that report that the region should do better for the rider,” Barz said. “It was a natural extension at some point that, when the region didn’t start acting on the report, somebody would.”

Seamless Bay Area is led by a core team of 10 professionals, many of whom have experience working at local transit systems. The group is helping shape regional transit advocacy, driving policy changes through creative programs and research, and

alerting riders about opportunities to speak up about fare integration and other potential organizational changes.

That's not to say there haven't been other groups working to support Bay Area transit. San Francisco Transit Riders has advocated for bus and rail improvements since 2010. Friends of Caltrain started the same year to keep the commuter rail service running amid the threat of service cuts — financial woes that still plague the operator today. Caltrain's board of directors is

considering transit governance options, including a merger with BART, a regional rail service plan that Friends of Caltrain and Seamless Bay Area support.

Whether such a union will occur remains to be seen, but a new poll underscores interest. About 83 percent of respondents support combining BART and Caltrain into a single integrated system, according to the Bay Area Council, the public policy group that conducted the poll.

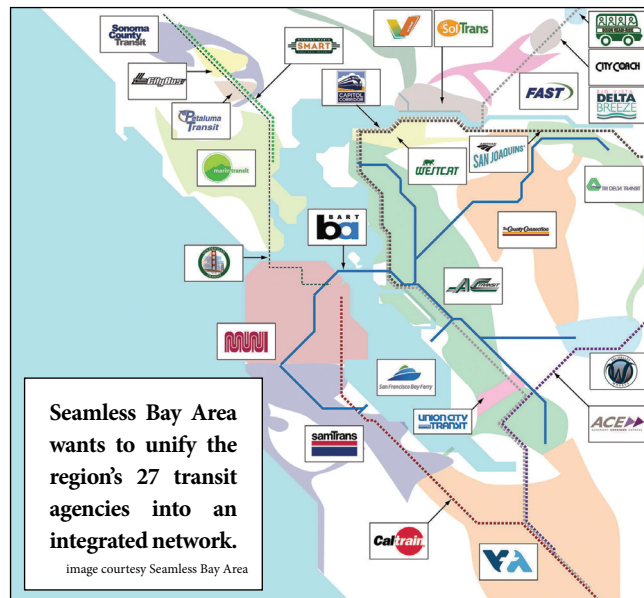
There are improvements swirling around other new transportation organizations.

The East Bay Transit Riders Union (EBTRU) launched last year because there was “no real organized voice of bus riders” to respond when AC Transit temporarily suspended evening service during the George Floyd protests to meet counties’ curfew orders, said Derek Sagehorn, EBTRU co-founder. Outside of the Bay Area, Transit Forward Philadelphia got going last February to prioritize transit and combat ridership declines.

“It’s a reaction to what was a downward spiral in transit quality in a lot of American cities,” said Ben Fried, communications director at TransitCenter, a foundation based in New York that works to improve public transit. “The long-term trend in a lot of places is the bus keeps getting slower and fewer people are riding.”

Add to that a plunge in ridership nationwide due to COVID-19, and many were left wondering if transit would fully recover. Seamless Bay Area adjusted its focus during the onset of the pandemic to prioritize health and safety and help advocate for emergency funding to keep systems going, said Ian Griffiths, the group's policy director.

The group also continued its advocacy work toward a unified regional transit system. But there were times when the message was “go away,” said Griffiths, describing



what outreach with some transit managers was like given pandemic-driven funding concerns and other limitations.

“It was a fine line we had to walk, whereby we knew reforms were incredibly important, but at the same time, the whole world was upside down, and [governance reform] was certainly not the most urgent thing anymore,” added Griffiths, who resigned as a senior planner at BART two years ago to focus on advocacy full-time.

Some of that sentiment began to shift after federal CARES Act relief funding became available last year. Uncertainties surrounding rider demand still put pressure on transportation officials to think collaboratively to get Bay Area bus and rail systems rolling again.

Griffiths and the Seamless Bay Area team were ready. While the nonprofit doesn’t have a very long track record, it is increasing its influence. About 50 community groups, cities, transit agencies, and other public entities have adopted its guiding principles.

One of them is United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County (USOAC). It would be easier for older people to “have one form of transit that takes care of everything,” said Chonita Chew, USOAC’s travel trainer/organizer.

Seamless Bay Area also is connecting with elected officials. The group was the primary sponsor of 2020’s Seamless Transit Act, introduced by San Francisco Assemblymember David Chiu in early 2020. While the bill was shelved due to the pandemic, one of its key recommendations — a task force — was realized when the Metropolitan Transportation Commission assembled one last May. The Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force invited Seamless Bay Area and 31 other elected officials, professionals, and groups to help direct a regional transportation path forward.

“I think that’s in recognition of the thought leadership and interest we bring to this topic through our vision map work and our advocacy on fare integration,” Griffiths said.

Its new report, *Governing Transit Seamlessly*, outlines options to coordinate regional transit by establishing a network manager. Released in April, the report analyzed several options and concluded that a network manager led by a regional transit agency is the route toward seamless, rider-first transit.

“Among the options we assessed, a nine-county agency that brings together BART, Caltrain, and other regional bus and ferry services under one roof, led by a board with a significant number of appointed experts with relevant backgrounds, is best positioned to be effective in delivering a seamless customer experience, expand access to all, and adapt and change over time,” according to the report.

In response to concerns that this type of governing body


might further confuse coordination and decision-making, Griffiths pointed to successful network management examples in other regions like Europe.

“We believe an existing agency should be reformed to become the network manager,” he said. “We don’t support creating a net new agency, which, if layered on top of the existing unreconciled agencies, would indeed create additional bureaucracy.”

Meanwhile, state legislation continues to advance the goal of seamless transit and proposes MTC handle some of the details. Assembly Bill 629 (Chiu) calls on MTC to work with agencies to design a single regional transit map, standardize wayfinding mechanisms, and report real-time transit data across the region.

Beyond engaging with transit agencies, Seamless Bay Area hustles to connect with riders. Pre-pandemic, it staffed information booths at outdoor events and worked on its “Transit Stories” project to record people’s thoughts on local transit and experiences riding and transferring.

The group also frequently posts action alerts, so riders know about opportunities to speak up during transit policy reform meetings. Last fall, it created a Connect the Bay transit board game based on its fare vision map and supported by an online donation campaign.

Said Griffiths: “I feel like we’ve made some breakthroughs in the past several months to get to this point, and I’m pretty optimistic as far as the future of Seamless Bay Area.” 

Cecily O’Connor covers transportation for the Monitor.



Keeping the Lights on with Microgrids

By Leslie Stewart

Self-reliance is an appealing concept, evoking the image of pioneers taking control of their own destiny, but it can be difficult to achieve in our modern world. The electrical grid which connects large power sources to homes, businesses, and community facilities serves everyone, but when it fails, it fails everyone. Recent planned and unplanned power outages across the state have had many residents asking themselves, “What would it take to be self-sufficient and independent of the grid?”

The quick (and literally dirty) answer has often been diesel backup generators. Although diesel generators (and cleaner propane models) have become a standard for emergencies, downsides include accidental fires and limited usability during longer disruptions. A more sustainable option, in many ways, is a microgrid.

Microgrids consist of a power source connected to battery storage; when energy isn’t wanted all at once, a controller system moves energy into and out of the batteries as needed. The power source can be a generator, solar panels, or fuel cells. Because microgrids produce power close to where it is used, instead of relying on large power generators many miles away, they don’t need large transmission lines. As a result, a distinctive feature of a microgrid is its self-sufficiency. While most microgrids are normally connected to the main grid, during outages they can be cut off — “islanded” — from the main grid and operate on their own, often for extensive periods of time.

Microgrids aren’t new — for years, “off the grid” homes and facilities have used wood or propane for light and heat because they were too distant from utility power lines. Large institutions such as colleges and hospitals have often relied on their own power generation and distribution systems, usually powered by fossil fuels. But microgrids have evolved, and the increasing inclusion of solar panels, storage batteries, and fuel cells means they can have both a smaller carbon footprint and lower energy costs. Microgrids can



Fire Station 11 is one of three in Fremont to have been equipped with solar-powered microgrids, saving on energy costs and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

photo courtesy the City of Fremont

achieve additional environmental benefits by incorporating sophisticated software to manage the balance between power generation, storage, and use. These technological advances now allow individual homeowners to create a one-home microgrid, although it might not supply all their needs in an emergency.

Multiple configurations of power sources and storage make it possible to think outside the box when setting up microgrids, or in some cases, inside a different box. BoxPower, a microgrid designer and manufacturer, packages its microgrids like kits in shipping containers, making them a good fit for situations where standard utility installations are impractical. The Grass Valley firm has created microgrids for a remote research station near Truckee (where hardening utility lines would have cost the local utility three times as much) and near Yosemite in the tiny community of Briceberg (where the microgrid will replace PG&E infrastructure vulnerable to wildfires).

Microgrids can also add permanent protection against power outages to vital community services. Using a 2015 California Energy Commission grant program for critical facility microgrids, the City of Fremont and Fremont-based firm Gridscape installed solar-powered microgrids at three city fire stations. Gridscape’s investment will be paid back

over 10 years by a power purchase agreement, which allows the city to buy the solar power at a negotiated price, saving on utility bills.

To ensure there are no fire response interruptions in an emergency, the project's software ensures that 25 to 30 percent of battery storage is available at all times, providing three hours of power if no solar is being generated, and up to 10 hours with solar input. Fremont Sustainability Manager Rachel DiFranco said, "We still have the diesel backup generator, but we expect to use it very briefly — only if the batteries are exhausted and we aren't generating solar right then — which should extend our generator availability considerably."

DiFranco reported that power purchasing agreements and advances in controller design are making microgrids more affordable for public agencies. Gridscape is currently working with other communities on similar critical facility projects, and recently received a loan guarantee from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District after a technical analysis by the agency. It's one of a growing number of firms installing microgrids around the Bay Area, from wastewater treatment plants in San Leandro and Santa Rosa to a private development in Healdsburg.


What microgrids provide in many of these examples is not total self-sufficiency, because they often draw from the main grid except in emergencies, and sometimes depend on backup generator power. Rather, it's resiliency, the ability to keep food or medications cold, medical equipment working, or safety lighting on.

CleanCoalition, a nonprofit working at maximizing the use of renewable energy, consulted on the Fremont fire station project. Executive director Craig Lewis described how another CleanCoalition microgrid project adds to the resiliency of the entire community. Valencia Gardens, a 260-unit housing development in the middle of the Mission District in San Francisco, serves low-income and elderly residents, two groups who are particularly at risk during power outages. When islanded, the Valencia Gardens microgrid will supply power according to a tiered system, with essential functions such as refrigeration and medical equipment powered continuously. Other needs would be powered some or most of the time depending on priority.

Lewis argues that a tiered process for prioritizing power use can also guide decisions on who pays for that power. If a fire station is designated as a Tier 1 facility, and its Tier 1 priority use for power is dispatching responders, the whole

community benefits from that service and Lewis feels it should eventually be supported by utility ratepayers. A different calculation could be made for a Tier 2 facility, such as a community shelter, which has both Tier 1 needs (heat or air conditioning) and Tier 2 needs such as restroom lights or meal preparation.

How microgrids, public or private, intersect with regulated utilities is an evolving picture. Recent California Public Utilities Commission and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission decisions have put more responsibility on the regulated utilities to develop and integrate microgrids for greater resiliency. BoxPower's Briceberg microgrid is one of 20 remote grids that PG&E plans by 2022. Many advocates for microgrids believe that more changes should be required. For example, a study on creating a microgrid for all City of Berkeley facilities concluded that a major barrier to such a plan is the current requirement for any power traveling across a roadway to be carried on utility wires.

Pressure for additional regulatory changes will grow as the potential of microgrids becomes better understood, either in standalone projects or as part of sub-regional community plans such as those designed by CleanCoalition for southern San Mateo County and the North Bay. Reduced power costs, an improved carbon footprint, flexibility, and greater independence from the main grid promise microgrids a starring role in meeting regional energy needs. 

Leslie Stewart covers air quality and energy for the Monitor.

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Bay Area Builds Regional Drought Resilience

By Robin Meadows



The Bay Area Regional Reliability partnership has discussed expanding Los Vaqueros Reservoir, shown here in July 2012.

photo by George Miller

It feels like California's 2011-2016 drought, our worst on record, had barely ended when the next one began. This is our second dry year in a row and, according to the state Department of Water Resources, the past winter tied for the third-driest on record. "Right now, California is dealing with a pretty severe and deepening drought," said UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain. He calls this our second major drought within a decade and, if you're like me, you're wondering if we've done anything since the last one to help keep water flowing from our taps. The answer is yes.

Early during that record-breaking dry stretch, eight Bay Area water agencies that collectively serve six million people formed a partnership — called Bay Area Regional Reliability (BARR) — to bolster regional drought preparation. "Unlike in some places, Bay Area agencies have developed ties including relationships and infrastructure," explained BARR co-project manager Bradley Ledesma, an East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) civil engineer. "When we hit record drought, it caused agencies to think about the bigger picture: how can we work together to increase resilience for the Bay Area?"

This collaboration will be even more critical in the future. California has naturally swung between deluge and drought for millennia. But climate change will intensify these swings, making droughts even more frequent and even more severe.

Funded partly by a \$400,000 U.S. Bureau of Reclamation grant, the BARR team identified ways to boost the reliability of the Bay Area's water supply. One idea is a shared desalination plant that treats brackish water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Another possibility is transferring water from EBMUD to Marin County via a pipeline across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge or along the bottom of the San Francisco Bay. Most of the options are in the conceptual phase. "Large projects can take decades," Ledesma said. But one is well underway: the expansion of Los Vaqueros Reservoir, which is owned by the Contra Costa Water District and sits in hills near Altamont Pass, overlooking the city of Livermore.

Los Vaqueros Reservoir has already been expanded once. Built in 1998, the reservoir originally stored 100,000 acre-feet, enough to supply about 200,000 households for a year. The first expansion raised the dam 34 feet, increasing storage to 160,000 acre-feet. The proposed second expansion would raise the dam another 55 feet, increasing storage to 275,000 acre-feet. Currently, the Contra Costa Water District uses all the water stored in Los Vaqueros Reservoir. But the BARR team thinks the upcoming expansion could also benefit other water agencies, including Valley Water in Santa Clara County. "This is a test case — can one agency store water in another agency's facility?" Ledesma said.

Valley Water could easily get water into Los Vaqueros

Reservoir. This is because the reservoir ties into a federal water delivery system called the Central Valley Project (CVP), and Valley Water has rights to CVP water. The problem is that the reservoir doesn't tie into Valley Water's own delivery system. "There's no way to get water out of Los Vaqueros Reservoir and into the Valley Water system," Ledesma explained. The expansion project would solve this problem by building a new eight-mile pipeline that connects the reservoir with an aqueduct that transports water to the South Bay.


Benefits of the Los Vaqueros expansion to Valley Water are clear. The agency would gain 30,000 acre-feet of storage, or 10 percent of its annual water use. That could help the agency take advantage of winters when water is plentiful. "If there's a really wet year, we could grab that supply and put it in Los Vaqueros," said Samantha Greene, Valley Water's lead on the expansion project.

This extra water could come in handy if the Delta, which supplies about 40 percent of the agency's water, was too salty. Water in the Delta could be undrinkable if rising tides pushed sea water further inland, or if a levee break pulled sea water further in. "If a levee goes, it could be out for a year or two," Greene said. "The expansion project could buy us a little time — when people want water, they usually want it now."

That said, Valley Water has a long list of other options for building such redundancy into Santa Clara County's water supply and is weighing the benefits of the Los Vaqueros Reservoir expansion against its cost. And the project's price tag is eye-popping: The Contra Costa Water District puts it at \$895 million. "Building a dam is very expensive," Greene noted.

An estimated \$223 million would come from federal sources including the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act that Congress passed in 2016; \$470 million from state sources including Proposition 1, the water bond that California voters passed in 2014; and \$202 million in local sources. The expansion project is scheduled to begin the design and construction phase in 2022, and is scheduled for completion in 2029.

Valley Water is one of several Bay Area water agencies considering partnering with the Contra Costa Water District on — and shouldering a share of the local cost of — the Los Vaqueros Reservoir expansion. "The question is whether it is the best option for the buck," Greene said. "Is it the best use of ratepayer money?" Other possible partners on the expansion include the Alameda County Water District, EBMUD, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, and the Zone 7 Water Agency, which serves the cities of Dublin, Livermore, and Pleasanton.

These agencies are also all BARR members and so, whatever their decisions on this particular project, are committed to building regional drought resilience. Moreover, the other options identified by the BARR team remain on the table for if and when they are needed in California's hotter, drier future. "We all experience drought in different ways," Ledesma said, referencing the fact that each agency has its own mix of water sources, from Sierra Nevada snow melt to regional rainfall to local groundwater recharge. "We want to make it easier for Bay Area water agencies to share water." 

Robin Meadows covers water for the Monitor.

East Bay 
Regional Park District

Healthy Parks Healthy People

Parks Are Essential

We are doing our part to keep parks open and are asking the public to continue wearing face coverings while in parks when required — even as the East Bay moves into less restrictive tiers.



Welcome to our new General Manager Sabrina Landreth who will continue to lead the District in protecting natural and cultural resources and providing parks for recreation, relaxation, and time with family and friends.



Photo: Callie Goodley

Coming Together for Bay Area Open Space

By Aleta George

Together Bay Area has emerged from its chrysalis, and if its Spring Summit 2021 is indicative of its future, the organization is well-poised to lend cohesion and support to its 69 member groups as they tackle the complicated challenges of building climate resilient lands and communities.

Together Bay Area stands on the shoulders of the Bay Area Open Space Council, a network of land conservation nonprofits and public agencies that provided resources and support to its members for nearly 30 years. In 2018 the organization “hit some turbulence,” said Annie Burke, a former council staff member and the current director of Together Bay Area, during a phone interview. When the council asked stakeholders if it was time to close its doors for good, the answer was a resounding “No!”

To explore how the organization could best serve its members and hone its mission going forward, it formed a planning committee that included those with long careers in conservation, and others who were just starting on their journeys. Half of the committee identified as people of color, most were women, and tribal representation was included.

“Who was at the table changed the conversation,” Burke told the *Monitor*. “The outcome was profound, thoughtful, and critical.”

Two meetings in particular stand out for Burke. One occurred in spring 2019 when Lorelle W.B. Ross, vice chair of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, spoke to the committee about reciprocity, and what it means to be in relationship with a place and with each other. “Lorelle’s words got us out of a dominant white culture mindset and into thinking deeply about who we are and how we want to operate,” said Burke in the interview.

Another shift came as the planning committee processed feedback from a series of community-based listening sessions that took place in 2019. I attended one of these sessions and wrote a *Monitor* article about the importance of viewing open space through a regional lens. Two dominant themes emerged from the listening sessions attended by about 140 participants: climate change and the need for equitable access

to land. Some on the planning committee were concerned that working on both issues would be difficult for a small organization, but others argued that the two were inextricably linked. “We need to heal our relationship with one another before we can heal our relationship with the land under us,” Burke told the *Monitor*, reflecting on Ross’s words spoken during one of the first planning meetings.

The organization changed its name to Together Bay Area, solidified its mission, and set aspirational goals that turned into practicable action when the coronavirus arrived like a freight train in spring 2020. In early March, the first cases

of COVID-19 were reported in several Bay Area counties. By mid-March, more cases and the first deaths were reported. By the end of March, cases in the Bay Area had reached 2,000 with 50 people dead.

In response to the infection rate, six Bay Area counties issued shelter-in-place orders in mid-March, followed a few days later by the state. The weekend after the orders, several days of beautiful weather lured tens of thousands of people outside and overwhelmed

park systems. Across the region, park managers wanted to know how their peers were handling the volume, and that led to a regular Friday online video chat facilitated by Together Bay Area, with over 25 managers discussing strategies and safety protocols, and learning from one another.

The seemingly runaway pandemic train is seeing a light at the end of the tunnel in California, but that doesn’t change the staggering numbers of coronavirus cases and deaths. As of May 24, the tally of cases in the Bay Area was 456,620 with 6,721 deaths, according to ABC News’s COVID-19 tracker.

COVID-19 was appropriately at the forefront of discussions during Together Bay Area’s Spring Summit 2021. Following in the tradition of Bay Area Open Space Council gatherings, Together Bay Area has hosted two gatherings since its launch, both virtual. Its most recent gathering was the Spring Summit in May 2021, and given the stress and anxiety of the past year, organizers wanted to insert some joy into the virtual arena. They came up with a



One of Together Bay Area’s Spring Summit sessions showcased projects that member groups worked on during the pandemic, including a newly completed segment of the Bay Trail that enhances access to Ravenswood Preserve, pictured here.

photo courtesy the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

winner by inviting OméDJ to kick things off and play during breaks. People were invited to dance in their isolation, and we did.

Besides COVID-19, there were plenty of other issues to discuss. Together Bay Area's Tom Robinson proposed that the organization was in a good position to help California achieve its "30x30" initiative goals, established by executive order in October 2020 when California became the first state to support a federal resolution to protect 30 percent of U.S. lands and ocean areas by 2030. Another topic of discussion covered Assembly Bill 1500, a \$7 billion climate resiliency bond co-authored by legislators Kevin Mullin and Eduardo Garcia, tentatively scheduled for the June 2022 ballot. "California is going to lead the way in climate resilience," said Mullin, an assertion shared by several presenters.

Several members presented projects they had worked on during the pandemic. These included the completion of the newest section of the Bay Trail at Ravenswood Preserve, closing a 0.6-mile gap in 80 miles of existing trail on the San Mateo County shoreline. The combination paved pathway, elevated boardwalk, and bridge improves access to the bay for East Palo Alto and Menlo Park communities. Other projects included the formation of a Parks Equity Action Team for Santa Clara County Parks, and the 100+ Jobs project, a partnership between Sustainable Agriculture Education (SAGE) and California Community Colleges, which inspires young people to explore jobs in agriculture, food, water, and the environment.

In one summit session, Burke interviewed Rohan Radhakrishna, a medical and public health doctor who is the new deputy director of the Office of Health Equity at the California Department of Public Health. "Basically, I hung up my stethoscope and am working on the overlapping crises of our time, which are unequivocally climate change and racial equity and socioeconomic inequity," he said.

At the top of the interview, Burke asked Radhakrishna how he was doing.

"I'm not okay," he admitted. The previous night his five-year-old son had a nightmare in which another kid had tied a rope around his neck. Before bed that night, they had been reading a children's biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

"I'm not okay," he repeated, because the previous week his eight-year-old daughter had expressed concern for his wife of East Asian descent who walked to work in San Francisco.


"And I'm not okay because in the past minute more than a hundred people have died in my motherland, India, due to COVID-19. As my friends on social media are joyously returning to normalcy, eating out, gathering, our sisters and brothers

elsewhere on the planet are massively dying." As of May 24, there were 26.8 million cases of COVID and 304,000 deaths in India, which is still fewer than the case numbers and deaths in America.

Radhakrishna and Burke talked about the impact of the lockdown on people's health, the importance of getting outside for physical and mental well-being, and the need to tackle racism, the root cause, he said, of inequity.

Radhakrishna told Burke that he also wanted to talk about love. "As a doctor and a public health worker, and a fellow human being, I believe that love is the oldest and most powerful medicine to heal our bodies, our minds, and our relationships," he said. "This has been a trying time when hate and violence are very visible, and so I want to make love equally visible. We can't protect what we don't love, and we're not going to stand up and fight for, and protect, each other or this planet, if we don't love each other."

The presentations from Radhakrishna and others at the summit offered promise for making progress on the complicated issues that we face today. The people who came to the table were diverse, passionate, and not afraid to mention the importance of love.

"The world has changed so much over the past year and a half," Burke told the *Monitor*. "I think Together Bay Area is well positioned to help connect, convene, and lead our members and the broader Bay Area community to meet this moment. We're in a good place, but the work of caring for an organization is never done." 

Aleta George covers open space for the Monitor.



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