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Citizens' rate reduction vanishing

River area ratepayers looking forward to an ordered rate reduction had better not count on a change until it's in their pockets.

In fact, instead of reduced rates, expected after a long case before the PUC, water customers of Citizens Utilities may soon see a small hike in their bills.

Last February PUC administrative Judge Robert Baer ruled that Citizens Utilities had not properly carried on its books timber rights of a watershed that had been transferred to a subsidiary company. The judge ordered Citizens to turn the book value of the land to ratepayers in the form of rate reductions. But Baer also ruled that a 1984 rate hike suspension be ended.

Earlier this month, Citizens Utilities ended the Public Utilities Commission with a set of figures previously ordered by the commission. Those calculations may result in a 2.27 percent rate hike for Citizens customers.

"Citizens Utilities is doing everything the PUC administrative Judge Robert Baer told them to," said Director-elect Niel Sinclair of the new Sweetwater Springs Water District, a new agency set up to oversee Citizens' utilities. "But we think the judge's decision is wrong."

Sinclair, who is also a leader of PATRIOTS, a group that brought the Citizens case to the PUC, charged that the judge had concocted "unusually accounting methods" not in line with generally accepted governmental accounting standards to be used by Citizens in figuring the rates. He said that PATRIOTS had filed a lawsuit last week with the PUC challenging Baer's accounting procedures. Sinclair said that if the accounting methods were used, ratepayers would have to pay back ratepayers \$600,000 for their timber rights errors. Following Baer's guidelines, Citizens had stated that they owed their customers \$1,000,000 for not including the watershed

plans in a letter from Mayor Anne Magnie, which said, "We are impressed and pleased by the degree of environmental sensitivity the Department of Public Works is showing in this entire project."

Santa Rosa has also been fully supportive of the use of the knoll for the fill, Mayer said. "They benefit from it also because the parcel will be better for irrigation than it is now," he explained. After the excavation is done, the county will re-contour the remaining land to facilitate drainage.

A second site, a little ways south of Occidental Road near Sanford Road, will also be used to contribute some of the fill dirt, said design engineer Rich Doble. By lowering the surface elevation in that 2.8 acre area, the county will create additional wetlands within the Laguna basin as a mitigation measure to offset the losses resulting from the expanded bridge approaches.

The absence of questions and concerns from the cities and other agencies apparently means that no environmental review of the fill plans will be needed. Additional surveys have confirmed that no archaeological sites or rare plant species would be affected by the operation.

The \$1.7 million project will be put out to bid in February, and the actual work "will probably start as soon as it's dry enough to get in there," said Doble. A detour will be constructed immediately south of the bridge to allow through traffic to continue to use Occidental Road during the four months it will take to replace the bridge.

—BRUCE ROBINSON



Both Michaelsen and Rosano, who together command more than 70 percent of law enforcement personnel in the county, said a lot of their eventual support depends on how the board is set up, who sits on it, and what powers it is given. Each now has a somewhat different means of dealing with citizens' complaints, but also cautioned that an additional police practices committee has often proven in other places to evolve into a highly politicized and highly confrontational body.

"To create one more without clearly defining its structure would cause more problems than it would solve," Rosano said.

Michaelsen, whose recent call for a drug task force prompted the ACLU response, said he has tried to live up to his last campaign promise to be more open to citizens but that the result has been the formation of "ex-officio" bodies that keep a low public profile.

One of those groups, originally known as the Gay and Lesbian Law Enforcement Committee but now called the Sonoma Community Against Violence, is a five-member panel that meets with Michaelsen quarterly to discuss the special needs of the Lesbian/Gay community.

According to Adam Richmond, a member of the panel, the group has been instrumental in "planting seeds" such as AIDS training programs for deputies and department briefings on gay and lesbian lifestyles.

"We've developed a good working relationship with them," Richmond said.

—PERRY GASKILL

Gravenstein scrambles to save teacher aides

Parents and school officials in the Gravenstein School District are appealing directly to district residents for supplemental funding to sustain the teacher aides now working at Gravenstein and Hillcrest Schools, following the defeat of a local bond issue in last month's election.