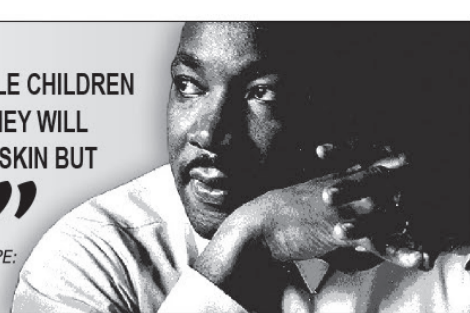




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Fuel Reduction Project Underway to Protect RM Area



Registered forester Phyllis Banducci inspects the completed work at a fuel reduction unit adjacent to Greens Park on Jan. 21. She is supervising the wildfire protection work on 927 acres around Rancho Murieta, which is being funded by a \$4.4-million CAL FIRE grant. Courtesy photo

**By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter**

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - A fuel reduction project underway in and around Rancho Murieta couldn't be more crucial.

"The work being done in Rancho Murieta and Deer Creek will help to protect the community from a north wind event like just happened in L.A.," said

Phyllis Banducci, the registered forester supervising the project. "The only difference is that our winds come across the mountains while the L.A. winds come across the desert, which makes them even more dry and dangerous than ours."

A \$4.4-million CAL FIRE grant is funding the Cosumnes Ladder Fuel Reduction Project. After the Rancho Murieta Fire Safe Council successfully

applied for the grant in 2022, CAL FIRE awarded it to Sacramento Regional Parks, which is overseeing the project's administration.

The goal's primary goal was to reduce ladder fuels, which involves pruning lower tree branches, thinning smaller trees and removing ground fuels.

"The objective is to manage the oak stand so that, if a fire enters the

area, it remains a ground fire," Banducci explained. "Crown fires generate significantly more embers, which can travel into our community and create serious risks."

A crown fire is a wildfire that spreads rapidly through the canopy or tops of trees.

During a Jan. 22 interview, Banducci said she expects the final contractor

Continued on page 4

CSD General Manager Takes Preliminary Step Toward Lawsuit



Mimi Morris, the Rancho Community Services District general manager, is giving notice of a government claim, a step that could lead to a lawsuit. She is currently on paid administrative leave. File photo by Gail Bullen

**By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times Reporter**

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - Mimi Morris, the Rancho Murieta Community Services District general manager, has taken the initial step toward filing a lawsuit against the district.

An attorney representing Morris

served a "government claim" following a Jan. 6 board meeting in which her ongoing rift with President Stephen Booth was revealed for the first time.

Under California law, employees must file a government claim before pursuing a lawsuit against a governmental entity. This process ensures the entity is informed of

potential claims and has an opportunity to address or resolve them before litigation.

During the Jan. 6 meeting, Morris read a statement accusing board President Stephen Booth of ongoing retaliation, discrimination and harassment.

In response to the allegations,

Continued on page 10

Development Behind Reservoirs Is Ruled Out

**By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter**

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - Rancho Murieta Properties has confirmed that it has abandoned plans to construct 136 residential lots behind the community's three reservoirs as part of the proposed Rancho North development.

John Merchant, vice-president of Save Our Lakes and Open Spaces (SOLOS), made the initial announcement on social media on Jan. 9 after meeting with three Rancho Murieta Properties representatives earlier in the day.

"I believe this action spells 'compromise,' and I hope we have opened up a line of communication to the developers that will expand as we work through the process," Merchant said in his post.

Greg Dyer, Rancho Murieta Properties' chief operating officer, confirmed Merchant's report in an interview and an email to the River Messenger Times on Jan. 10. He also explained why the investment group made that decision.

Dyer said a variety of factors were involved.

"Construction of infrastructure, satisfying environmental issues, and anticipated costs were just too problematic to be worth the effort," he said. "We have not developed any plan for Lot 11 (formerly Villages A, B, C & D)."

Merchant also announced on social media that 39 acres adjacent to the Rancho Murieta Community Services District office have been excluded from development plans. The original proposal had included 88 residential units and 160 apartments.

Dyer was asked for confirmation.

"That is true for now. Technically, this was not yet part of our application but was in the process," he said. "But again, the costs of infrastructure and obtaining satisfactory access to the property were very costly and would take years to accomplish."

Dyer was also asked whether the availability of water for the 561 residential lots remaining in the county application had been discussed.

"Sort of, but we ran out of time," Dyer said in an email. "We discussed many issues with which we both agree, covering the Country Club, Waste Water

Continued on page 12

CSD Board Considers Overdue Audits and Unpaid Insurance



Mark Matulich, Rancho Murieta Community Services District director of Finance and Administration, receives approval to hire temporary accountants to help with overdue audits at the board's Jan. 15 meeting. Photo by Gail Bullen

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG)

- Hiring temporary accountants and dealing with lapsed property insurance coverage were topics when the Rancho Murieta Community Services District Board met on Jan. 15.

The board voted to hire outside accountants for \$170,000 to speed up the completion of two overdue audits. They also reversed General Manager Mimi Morris's earlier decision to drop property insurance coverage without advising the board.

In other business, the board addressed a controversial ordinance to increase barcode sticker fees and an unexpected proposal to replace the draft Integrated Water Master Plan. See two stories on these topics in this issue.

Morris didn't attend the meeting because she is on a paid leave of absence. See separate stories explaining her absence in this issue.

Accounting Help

The agenda item

about funding temporary employees originated from a suggestion by Director John Merchant at the Dec. 18 meeting. He asked Director of Finance and Administration Mark Matulich whether "renting another CPA" could expedite the finalization of overdue audits. While Matulich acknowledged that it could be helpful, Morris cautioned that previous attempts to hire consultants had not accelerated progress due to the steep learning curve. Despite this concern, the board directed Matulich to explore the option further.

At the January meeting, Matulich proposed hiring two temporary accountants from Robert Half International from Feb. 1 through the end of June for \$170,000 with funding from property tax revenues. The temporary staff will assist in completing the accounting for fiscal years 2022-23 and 2023-24, with the goal of finalizing the audits by the end of the current fiscal year.

Matulich said that he and other staff have spent two years addressing unresolved accounting issues

stemming from the loss of institutional knowledge during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 fiscal years. In the process, they developed templates and workflows to streamline the accounting. Matulich said it would be like "painting by the numbers," as the temporary accountants repost several thousand transactions to rebuild the two remaining years.

Although Directors Jenco and Tim Maybee had expressed concerns earlier in the meeting about diverting property tax revenues from reserves to pay for security, they joined the other three board members in unanimously approving the \$170,000 expenditure of property taxes to expedite the completion of the overdue audits.

Matulich also reported that the 2021-2022 fiscal year audit was underway. He noted that the auditors informed him that it was the first time in three to four years that the fixed assets had been thoroughly reviewed and reconciled.

Property Insurance

The agenda included a \$127,000 payment to Golden State Risk

Management (GSRM), the district's insurance pool, to reinstate the district's property insurance, which

Morris had canceled earlier in the year. Other insurance coverages for the district remained unaffected.

According to a memo from Morris, she learned from a Golden State Risk Management representative in early 2024 that the property insurance did not cover fires, floods or earthquakes, yet the premium was increasing.

Morris wrote that she raised her concerns with the board in February about a 50% hike in the premium for the limited coverage. Following the meeting, she explored alternatives and concluded that self-insurance was the best option. When Matulich inquired about renewing the policy in June, Morris instructed him to cancel it. However, she did not inform the board of her decision.

The Golden State Risk Management Chief Administrative Officer recently contacted Booth and District Counsel Patrick Enright to address concerns about canceling the district's property

insurance. Booth said the Golden State Risk Management representative clarified that the coverage does include fire and flood, with a separate rider available for earthquake coverage.

Booth subsequently motioned to approve the \$127,000 payment to Golden State Risk Management to reinstate the property insurance. The motion passed with a 4:1 vote, with Director Tim Maybee casting the sole dissenting vote.

Other Business

In other business, the board approved a \$179,000 expenditure to upgrade the Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems at the water and wastewater plants.

In a related decision, the board authorized the purchase of a sodium hypochlorite pump for the wastewater plant for \$42,000 plus taxes. This pre-purchase is anticipated to save \$22,682 on the ongoing reconstruction project.

Additionally, the board approved Houston's recommendation to allocate

\$12,000 for a bathymetric survey of Clementia Reservoir. The survey will produce detailed contour maps and a reservoir capacity analysis.

In other business, resident Harry Gao complained about receiving a \$6,000 water bill after his tenant moved out. Matulich presented a budget timeline, and Houston explained groundwater as part of his "Water 101" educational series, which will be archived on the district's website.

Although the agenda included a discussion about scheduling a strategic planning session, the board took no action on the matter.

The board's next meeting will be at 5 p.m. Feb. 19. ★

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CSD Considers Proposal to Table Water Plan

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG)

Originally tasked with finding an outside consultant to review the draft 2024 Integrated Water Master Plan, Operations Manager Eric Houston has advised against finalizing it, citing its lack of a clear path forward.

Houston made that recommendation at the Rancho Murieta Community Services District Board meeting on Jan. 15.

In other business, the board voted to table an ordinance increasing barcode sticker fees, agreed to spend \$170,000 to speed the completion of overdue audits, and reversed a decision General Manager Mimi Morris to cancel a property insurance policy. Morris didn't attend the meeting because she is on a paid leave of absence. See four separate stories in this issue of the River Valley Times.

Urban Water Plan

Although the agenda included an item for Houston to report on his efforts to organize a review of the draft IWMP by outside engineers and community residents, he addressed the matter differently.

"I believe it would behoove us to basically restart that process and get one that's usable," he said. "I think we can use most of the data that has already been collected by Lisa Maddaus. But I definitely think we need a better plan and vision."

After more than a year and a half of effort, the consultants submitted the

draft IWMP in October.

Rather than finalizing the draft, Houston proposes that the district develop an urban water supply plan, which will be required by the state Department of Water Resources once the district reaches 3,000 water connections — expected within the next year.

Houston also reported that Water Systems Consultants is preparing a scope of work for the district. The engineering consultants previously developed a Water Vision Report and an urban water supply plan for the City of Folsom. Houston indicated the cost could range between \$300,000 and \$500,000, although he didn't yet have an estimate. The district has already spent around \$400,000 on the IWMP draft.

Houston said the IWMP consultants had not thoroughly explored options to augment the community's water supply. "I think anytime you want to make an agreement to supply water, it should never be solely based on conservation," he said.

Houston said the district needs a more defensible water plan to effectively engage with developers and the county and make decisions internally.

District Counsel Enright expressed his agreement to pursue an urban water supply plan. "We are remarkably close to 3,000 right now. So it doesn't make any sense to have a plan that we're going to redo basically once we get there."

Merchant praised Water Systems Consultants. He attended one of the Water Vision meetings they organized in Folsom and was impressed. Merchant said



Operations Manager Eric Houston makes a surprise recommendation at the Jan. 15 meeting of the Rancho Murieta Community Services District Board meeting. Mark Matulich is also pictured. Photos by Gail Bullen

he had wanted that firm to bid on the IWMP, but it never got a shot. (See an explanation later in this story.)

Board President Stephen Booth also criticized the draft IWMP, saying it "doesn't provide a plan moving forward, and that is a major deficiency." As an alternative, Booth expressed hopes for a hybrid approach that uses already existing data.

Director Randy Jenco expressed feeling blindsided by Houston's proposal. While he stated that he was not opposed to hiring someone to explore options for increasing water production or reducing demand, he questioned the need to redo the IWMP, given the substantial funds already invested in its development.

Booth asked Jenco what could steer the conversation in a direction more favorable to him. Jenco responded that he would be ready to have that discussion once they received the scope and cost estimates from the new firm.

Audience member Tom Shewchuk told the board they should instead consider his proposal to form an ad hoc committee involving CSD, the Rancho



Audience member Tom Shewchuk suggests the board form a community committee to develop a water plan instead of using outside consultants.

Murieta Association, and the Rancho Murieta Country Club to solve the community's water problem. He said Houston has enough expertise to put together an urban water plan without hiring outside consultants.

Booth referred Houston's proposal to the Improvements Committee for further consideration. Merchant and Jenco are on that committee.

During the discussion, Booth noted that the board has acknowledged the inevitability of full development in the already approved Residences subdivision on the north and Riverview on the south. Merchant added that he anticipates Clementia Reservoir will be designated as an emergency water supply, though he

acknowledged it would not be sufficient.

Background

Updating the IWMP became a concern in 2022 when the Rancho North subdivision, proposing 697 lots, updated its application with Sacramento County planners in March. Comments by the late John Sullivan, who represented the developers, increased the sense of urgency.

After the district requested proposals to prepare an IWMP and an urban water supply plan, the only bid came as a joint proposal from Maddaus Water Management in California and Adkins Engineering in Oregon. When reporting that outcome at the Nov. 16, 2022, Board meeting, then-Operations Manager Michael said he had advertised twice and reached out to 11 qualified engineering firms. All indicated they were too busy to take on the project, although he received one rough estimate of \$599,000.

Although the Maddaus-Adkins bid was \$340,000, which exceeded the budget of \$250,000, then-Director Martin Pohll suggested approving the bid with the understanding that Fritsch would negotiate a lower price by reducing the scope. Pohll, Director Tim Maybee and a reluctant Director Linda Butler voted in favor. Jenco was absent.

Merchant didn't vote on the bid because he unexpectedly resigned from the board a month earlier, telling the other directors he wanted to spend more time with SOLOS (Save Our Lakes & Open Spaces), a community action group. His resignation also came

a month after Sullivan accused him of "malfeasance" at the Sept. 21, 2022, board meeting. Sullivan said Merchant had tried to "submarine" his project at county planning.

Fritsch negotiated a reduced price of \$291,000 by removing the urban water plan, with the understanding that most of the data from the IMWP could be repurposed for the second plan later.

The Improvements Committee met on Dec. 7, 2022, to consider the reduced bid. Merchant objected to the proposal, saying it was premature because Fritsch hadn't exhausted the talent pool and because using Maddaus again would bring unintended bias. (She wrote the IWMP in 2010 and the Water Supply Assessment in 2016 that both concluded the community had enough water for development.) Merchant also objected because the proposal lacked a provision for public meetings (which was later added). Maddaus attended that meeting to discuss her expertise and the project approach.

After the Improvements Committee recommended its approval, the board voted on the reduced bid at their Dec. 21, 2022, meeting. Newly appointed Director Booth, Pohll, Jenco, and Maybee voted yes, and Butler voted no. Booth said he was voting "aye" with some reticence, "So we can get this moving."

Since then, the board has approved additional work that brought the not-to-exceed estimate for preparing the IWMP to \$408,000, according to figures Houston supplied. ★

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Barcode Fees, Security Reports are CSD Topics

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG)

- Facing public pressure, the Rancho Murieta Community Services District Board voted 3-2 to postpone an ordinance that would increase barcode sticker fees to support the security department's implementation of 24/7/365 patrol coverage. The decision was made during the board's Jan. 15 meeting.

On a related note, Director of Finance and Administration Mark Matulich detailed the reorganization of security operations designed to enhance community safety and provide full patrol coverage for the first time in several years.

Another update of note came from District Counsel Patrick Enright. He said that the directors voted 4-0 in a Jan. 6 closed session to place General Manager Mimi Morris on paid administrative leave.

Morris didn't attend the Jan. 15 board meeting. See two separate stories in this issue that further explain her absence.

The board also considered a range of other topics, including the status of the Integrated Water Master Plan, speeding up the overdue audits, and reinstating the district's property insurance coverage. See separate stories about those topics in this issue.

Barcode Sticker Fees

The agenda item focused on the second reading and approval of an ordinance to update barcode sticker fees, which had remained unchanged for 30 years. The proposed changes included increasing the one-time fee for a new vehicle to \$25 and introducing a \$10 annual fee.

Matulich proposed the fee increase to bolster the security budget, allowing

for additional positions to ensure 24/7/365 coverage for the community. During the November meeting, the board approved an \$85,000 increase to the revised security budget based on expected income from the barcode sticker fees. The next step was adopting an ordinance to authorize the fees at the next two meetings.

After the district published a notice about a hearing for the ordinance, many residents expressed frustration through angry comments on social media. In response, Board President Stephen Booth posted that he would request to table the ordinance at the December meeting, despite viewing the proposed fee as a creative solution to boost security funding.

Despite initial resistance, the board unanimously approved the ordinance when it was introduced on Dec. 18. Directors Linda Butler and John Merchant, who initially advocated tabling the measure, changed their stance after President Stephen Booth suggested a solution that involved providing a clear explanation about the fee increase in the next Pipeline newsletter and utility bills. Booth also noted that if the communication effort proved ineffective, the board could vote against the ordinance in January.

When the directors convened on Jan. 15, they saw 11 letters opposing the fee and only one in favor inside their board meeting packets. Booth also told them that the Finance Committee had recommended tabling the ordinance and revisiting it during the budget process.

"I think there is a desire within the community to have a clearer picture of how the money is spent," Booth said.

When Booth asked Matulich how the decision would impact the

security budget, Matulich explained that it would create an immediate \$85,000 shortfall in funds needed to cover the additional staffing costs for the remainder of the year. When pressed for options to address the shortfall, Matulich stated that the only available solution would be to use property tax revenue.

Ultimately, Booth, Butler and Merchant voted to table the ordinance, while Jenco and Merchant opposed the motion.

The issue of how to address the shortfall remained unresolved, although both Jenco and Maybee voiced strong opposition to using property taxes to cover the gap.

"I think the adults in the room need to step up and do the right thing," Jenco said. "It's a great idea today. It's going to be a great idea four months from now and nothing is going to change."

Jenco stated that his top priority since joining the board has been funding the reserves. He emphasized that using tax revenue for security would divert funds from the reserves.

Maybee noted that the Grand Jury report clearly stated that the district shouldn't use tax revenues for security. He also pointed out that the board had directed the general manager to prepare a balanced budget for 2024/25, ensuring that every department, including security, would be self-sustaining.

At another point, Booth informed the board about an upcoming meeting focused on security. The meeting would include the general managers and board presidents from the district, the Rancho Murieta Association, and the Rancho Murieta Country Club. Booth added that he would also bring Matulich to the meeting.

Security Report

During his security report, Matulich provided

an update on operations and for the first time presented reports that were discontinued, following the resignation of former Security Chief Kelly Benitez in February. The revived reports include graphs illustrating calls for service and the widely appreciated "Incidents of Note" section.

In his operations update, Matulich read from a report he had prepared for the meeting packet. He explained that the security team currently includes one full-time administrative sergeant, six full-time gate officers, eight part-time gate officers, and four full-time community service officers (CSOs). Two new iPads have been installed in patrol vehicles to improve efficiency in the field, enabling the CSOs to update the security log directly while on duty. He also noted that weekly security logs are now regularly posted on the district's website.

Matulich also reported significant upgrades to the video monitoring infrastructure. Security cameras and related equipment at each gatehouse have been refreshed and reconfigured, allowing the gate officers to monitor the surveillance camera network more effectively.

Matulich explained that these systems now offer real-time access to video feeds from over 30 security cameras positioned throughout the community, including those at Calero and Clementia Reservoirs. Additionally, a new surveillance camera with license plate recognition capabilities has been installed at the transition point of the paved road, enhancing security in the area. Matulich also highlighted recent efforts by staff to develop a comprehensive plan to improve community safety and security. This plan restores full coverage for both gate and patrol shifts.

The amended fiscal year 2024-25 security budget, approved by the board at the November meeting, made this possible. The amended budget incorporated \$85,000 in additional funding generated by implementing barcode sticker fees.

Matulich explained that the plan started with reviewing and adjusting the district's indirect cost rate for allocating administrative overhead. It also included restructuring the department to enhance efficiency by replacing a high-cost administrator with expanded patrol services, enabling more effective resource allocation.

Additional cost-saving measures included reducing the number of full-time gate officers from eight to six and covering the remaining shifts with a larger pool of part-time employees. Matulich noted that this approach not only lowered costs but also improved the flexibility and resilience of the gate schedule by ensuring a broader pool of part-time staff is available to fill shifts as needed.

Questioned about benefits by Director Linda Butler, Matulich confirmed that the part-time employees don't receive them, which significantly reduces the associated costs.

Matulich explained that creating the community service officer (CSO) position further optimized the patrol budget while upholding the department's mission to observe and report. Unlike the previous patrol officers, the community service officers are unarmed.

"Having around-the-clock patrol every day is a deterrent to bad actors, which leads to a safer and more secure community," he said.

Matulich noted that the collaboration between patrol and gate services has significantly improved



The Rancho Murieta Community Services District Board places an ordinance to increase fees for barcode stickers on hold. Photo by Gail Bullen

operations, fostering better coordination. For example, patrol staff now assist by providing breaks for gate officers and serving as backup for open gate shifts or urgent coverage needs, resulting in a more resilient and responsive security system.

Reinstated Reports

Matulich then presented a report that had not been provided to the board since former Security Supervisor Benitez resigned in February.

The report included two graphs: the first illustrated the number of violations recorded by security in 2024, while the second detailed the types of calls handled by security in the previous month. These calls ranged from 10 alarms to 11 incidents of juvenile delinquency.

Matulich also reinstated the "Incidents of Note" report, a feature popularized by Benitez. This month's report highlighted a single incident on Dec. 30 involving a motorist suspected of driving under the influence.

According to the report, the driver struck the gate arm at the Lago Drive inbound lane, exited their utility vehicle and vomited on the ground, as captured by security surveillance cameras.

Several witnesses provided statements to the gate officer on duty. The California Highway Patrol responded to the scene and arrested the driver for driving under the influence. The gate officer later repositioned the undamaged gate arm. The report noted that the driver was a registered guest. ★

Fuel Reduction Project Underway to Protect RM Area

Continued from page 1

working within the gates to finish by Jan. 24. Meanwhile, a second contractor had already started operations in the Deer Creek Hills Preserve and a third had commenced heavy fuel reduction efforts on the Pilliken Ranch, situated across Scott Road from the preserve.

Banducci was uncertain whether the three contractors could continue working beyond the original hard stop date of Feb. 1, which aligns with the start of the nesting bird season. Otherwise, the crews won't be able to resume work after the rains begin next fall. The grant stipulates that all work must be completed by March 2026.

A total of approximately 937 acres have been designated for fuel reduction. Of this, 363 acres (40%) are inside the gates, while 322 acres (33%) are on ranch lands west of Scott Road. Additionally, 252 acres (27%) of oak stands in Deer Creek Hills, east of Scott Road and along Latrobe Road, are scheduled for treatment.

Banducci said that work began in early November but was soon delayed due to heavy rains. The contractors initially focused on the area around the eagles' nest, located southeast of Clementia Reservoir, to ensure that they completed the work before nesting season. After finishing that section in December, they continued moving south

and west, completing the units east of the reservoirs and adjacent to Deer Creek Hills. The primary objective was to finish the work in Rancho Murieta before transitioning to other areas.

After surveying all the properties on foot in 2022 and 2023, Banducci divided them into 21 units, varying in size from three to 129 acres. She developed a specific treatment prescription for each unit to direct the contractors' work and conducts daily site inspections to ensure the plans are followed.

The project utilizes three different types of fuel reduction treatments, according to Banducci. A light treatment focuses solely on ground fuel removal without any pruning or thinning of the trees. Ground fuel, she noted, includes dead branches and fallen trees that accumulate on the forest floor over time.

A medium treatment includes ground fuel and moderate trimming of trees less than 6 inches in diameter. However, this treatment is limited to specific areas, such as the 100-foot buffer zones adjacent to Latrobe and Scott roads and along property line boundaries.

A heavy treatment involves ground fuel treatment, tree thinning and pruning the lower tree branches up to 8 feet above the ground to eliminate ladder fuels. Heavy treatment units, such as the one

encompassing the Parkway Loop Trail off Camino Del Lago, need large equipment, such as masticators, to get through the heavy fuel.

The goal is to tailor the treatment approach to suit the specific conditions of each unit, striking a balance between effective fuel reduction and environmental preservation. For example, in some units, Banducci might direct contractors sawing up a downed tree to leave the larger logs on the ground to maintain ecological benefits while addressing fire risk.

"The larger material doesn't ignite as quickly as the fines," Banducci said. "So the fines are what we are trying to treat because if an ember lands in that fine material, the chances of it taking off and creating a spot fire are much greater than if it landed on or near a larger piece of wood."

On the other hand, when a unit is replete with dead fuel, such as the Parkway Loop. "They are actually grinding up pretty much everything," she said.

The unit adjacent to Greens Park in the south required heavy treatment due to the extensive growth of blackberry bushes and the accumulation of dead fuels. It is also the unit closest to homes, which made it a high priority.

Banducci said the project provided "instant gratification," noting the dramatic transformations achieved

through the heavy fuel reduction efforts. Within a couple of days, the work had effectively doubled the park's size, creating a more open and accessible space.

Some miles away at Deer Creek Hills, Banducci worked with the managers to prescribe a lighter treatment for the area because it is managed as a preserve. Contractors will lightly thin and prune trees and treat ground fuel within the 100-foot buffer zones but will focus on ground fuel removal in the remaining areas. Furthermore, they will leave behind a mosaic of wildlife habitats that biologists have designated.

Banducci became involved in the project in 2022. Having retired from CAL FIRE six years earlier, she initially intended to volunteer after hearing about the \$4.4 million award. However, upon learning the project required a registered professional forester to prescribe treatments for the oak woodlands, Banducci established a sole proprietorship to take on the role. Despite her nearly 40 years of forestry experience, Banducci lacked the specific contracting background the county sought.

Banducci contacted FRST Corp, a forestry company based in Grass Valley, to see if the company would consider hiring her as a subcontractor.

"We put in the bid, and then we got the contract," she said.



Sawyers show off their equipment used for pruning in a unit behind Calero Reservoir. Photo by Gail Bullen

Banducci pointed out that this arrangement likely saved some grant money, as she only charges minimal mileage if she inspects outside the gates. Because Banducci lives in Rancho Murieta, her transportation has included her golf cart and she often brings her dog Sandy, whom she affectionately calls "my crew." She doesn't hesitate to walk the rest if the golf cart flounders.

The county requires Banducci to review and approve all contractor invoices before processing payment. To streamline this process, she has developed spreadsheets summarizing contractor hours, equipment usage and work completed daily. Tracking the data on her phone daily has expedited the process.

Banducci emphasized that the project wouldn't have happened without the Rancho Murieta Regional Fire Safe Council. The council persistently applied for multiple grants and ultimately secured the \$4.4 million CAL FIRE grant

in 2022, much to their amazement.

Banducci noted that Rob Schultz, who wrote the grant application, brought invaluable institutional knowledge about the community to the project. Three other council members contributed to the application process: Greg Pryor, the board president, and council members Cheryl McElhaney and Kelly Hopkins. Hopkins also serves as the executive director of the Sacramento Valley Conservancy, which manages Deer Creek Hills.

Pryor lauded former Sacramento County Supervisor Sue Frost, whose assistance was crucial to the project. Since the Fire Safe Council wasn't a nonprofit organization, it needed a sponsor to apply for the CAL FIRE grant.

Frost facilitated the involvement of county parks and Veronica Thorley, a county parks staff member, is the project's administrative manager. ★

Serious Rift Surfaces at CSD Board Meeting

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - The governance of the Rancho Murieta Community Services District might be at a crossroads, as evidenced by a special board meeting on Jan. 6.

The meeting agenda suggested that the board might consider disciplining or dismissing General Manager Mimi Morris during the closed session. Morris also revealed a serious rift between herself and Board President Stephen Booth.

Booth didn't attend the meeting due to instructions provided by District Counsel Patrick Enright. Before the four other directors withdrew into closed session, Morris read a prepared statement.

"Today's special, closed session appears to result not from any alleged deficiencies in my performance but rather from President Booth's ongoing retaliation, discrimination and harassment," she said.

Asked to respond after the meeting, Booth told the River Valley Times: "I categorically deny that there has been any discrimination against her for any reason."

When the board reconvened in public session, Enright announced that the board had taken no action.

However, nine days later, Enright amended that statement at the Jan. 15 board meeting. Enright said he wanted to make a brief announcement about the closed session at Jan. 6 board meeting.

"The Board of Directors voted four to nothing to place the general manager on paid administrative leave," Enright said. "President Booth was absent from the special meeting and did not participate in the closed session."

Special Meeting Agenda

The decision to hold the special meeting on Jan. 6 has its origins in the board's organizational meeting on Dec. 6. Booth was leaving the country, so he asked Enright and Merchant to establish the Dec. 18 meeting agenda.

According to separate comments by Morris, Booth and Director John Merchant, the board originally planned to evaluate Morris in closed session on Dec. 18. However, after some board members expressed concern that they were evaluating the general manager too frequently, Enright requested it be pulled so it could be rescheduled, according to Booth.

The Jan. 6 special meeting agenda listed three topics to be discussed in the closed session. The first was "Public employment performance evaluation - title: general manager." The second was "public employment discipline/dismissal/release." The third was "Conference with legal counsel - anticipated litigation."

Following the Jan. 6 meeting, The River Valley Times asked Merchant why he and Enright had added the second and third items about discipline and anticipated litigation to the special meeting agenda since it suggested the board might be firing Morris. (When her evaluation was a topic in closed session on previous agendas, the other two topics weren't listed.)

Merchant said it was about covering the bases. "Well, if you don't put it



Rancho Murieta Community Services District General Manager Mimi Morris reveals rift with President Stephen Booth at Jan. 6 special board meeting. Photos by Gail Bullen



Booth disputes the accusations made by the general manager.

on the agenda then you can't discuss it," he said.

Booth said he had nothing to do with establishing the Jan. 6 meeting agenda. Merchant confirmed that was the case.

Morris' Statement

The first point Morris made in her Jan. 6 prepared statement was that while the district is legally required to provide her with the opportunity to publicly respond to whatever supposed performance issues are being discussed in closed session, the district had failed to inform her of those issues.

Morris said the district was experiencing difficulties when she was hired in May 2023. Since then, Morris said, she has focused on rebuilding the district, from installing bright, energy-efficient lights to developing accurate and validated financial records and hiring highly competent professionals.

"My goal has been to set the organization on an even keel, to help it be strong enough to effectively survive for decades," she said.

Morris said that she has been successful. She said the majority of the then-board of directors agreed on Nov. 20 and provided a merit salary increase. Directors Tim Maybee, Martin Pohll, and Randy Jenco voted yes, while Booth and Linda Butler voted no.

"However, in December, with the new board majority and the resulting election of Stephen Booth as board president, circumstances have significantly changed," Morris said.

At that point in her

statement, Morris recalled last April when she experienced a significant medical issue that required surgeries and procedures throughout the spring and summer.

She said the district was required by law to provide reasonable accommodations, including the ability to work remotely when necessary.

Morris said Booth began questioning her need for reasonable accommodations at the August meeting. More recently, Morris said, he sent her an email confirming his "improper position" about accommodations. She said Booth also suggested agendizing a report on remote workers for the Dec. 18 board meeting but it was withdrawn before the meeting.

Booth was asked by the River Valley Times to respond.

"That is a blatant mischaracterization of what I have repeatedly stated," Booth told the River Valley Times on Jan. 7. "I emphatically stated that I had no objection to her time off or her working remotely under medical advice."

Booth said that after the medical restriction was lifted, Morris continued to work remotely. At the same time, she also allowed Mark Matulich, the director of finance and administration, to work remotely for much of the week.

Booth said other directors shared his concern about the resulting lack of management presence in the district office.

Morris also said she believed that Booth's

discrimination related to her medical issues stemmed from her efforts to ensure that the board acted in compliance with the law at the August meeting.

Specifically, she discussed the district's obligations under California law and its prior agreements to provide water for those who helped fund the water treatment plant expansion, which paved the way for additional development.

"My statement was that even with no further development, the district needed to comply with its legal obligations to increase the overall resiliency of the water system, which was met with outrage and hostility by the anti-development board members who do not want to save water but instead wish to maintain the myth that there is not enough water to sustain development," Morris said.

In response, Booth told the River Valley Times: "I categorically deny that there's been any discrimination against her for any reason, number one. And, number two, my position with regard to the will-serve letters, availability of water and the pending water management plan is all well established in the record. I'm just not going to comment further on that additional falsehood other than to call it false."

Morris said Booth publicly retaliated against her at the Nov. 20 board meeting after a closed-session deliberation of her performance (which included a pay raise discussion).

During the open

meeting, Booth said one of his reasons for opposing Morris's pay raise was the delay in completing the audits. While he believed that she and Mark Matulich, the director of finance and administration, were making progress, Booth said, they were also spending time on initiatives not important to the board. "I think some of them are specifically designed to benefit the general manager herself, economically."

Booth also referred to a number of occasions in which "state and federal law weren't abided by because of action or inaction by the general manager. I also think there is a tendency sometimes to provide less than accurate and honest information when inquiries are made regarding issues before the board," he said.

In her prepared statement, Morris said Booth's comments were defamatory and had damaged her personally and professionally. "They also were inappropriate for an open session to the extent that a member of the public with extensive administrative experience chastised you."

Asked about his comments at the November meeting, Booth explained the background was the October meeting. That's when Morris and then-President Tim Maybee proposed enhancing her compensation by more than \$100,000 over two years. Booth said he was successful in pulling the proposal off the October agenda but it came up again in November.

"I was adamantly opposed to any increase, again, because of the process that we have in place that wasn't being followed and because I did not believe that the GM's performance was up to par," Booth told the River Valley Times on Jan. 7 referencing the November meeting. "And I did give a very brief explanation of my objections in open session because I was appalled that the matter was being brought up again for board consideration."

(During the November meeting, then-Board President Maybee initiated the discussion on a pay raise for Morris by acknowledging the receipt of eight form letters from residents opposing the increase. Director Randy provided context, explaining that the board had reached a general consensus in January to grant Morris a 10% raise. However, due to a technical issue, only a 5.5% increase had been implemented. Jenco subsequently moved to approve an additional 4.5% increase, retroactive to January.

Morris was initially hired at a salary of \$194,180. The first raise increased her pay to \$204,838, and the proposed adjustment would raise it to \$213,576. Maybee, Jenco and then-Director Martin Pohll voted to approve the 4.5% increase. Booth and Director Linda Butler against it.

Since the salary increase amounted to only \$38,000 over two years, The River Valley Times emailed Booth on January 18 to clarify his statement that it would cost the district more than \$100,000. The River Valley Times proposed a hypothesis: even with a salary burden of 60%—accounting for employer costs like CalPERS retirement and health insurance—the total cost to the district would be approximately \$60,000

over two years.

Booth explained that the package initially proposed in October included a 10% salary increase in addition to the 5.5% raise already approved by the board, along with a 5% contribution to deferred compensation to be covered by the district. However, Booth said he didn't know how much the smaller raise approved by the board in November would ultimately cost the district.)

Morris went on to say in her Jan. 6 statement that Booth continued to retaliate after she complained in writing about his conduct to Maybee and Enright on Nov. 21.

Booth said he didn't know about her complaint until Enright emailed him just before the Dec. 18 meeting.

Her statement said that Booth's retaliation continued at the Dec. 6 board meeting, when he removed her as a representative to the Regional Water Board.

Booth explained he had made that tentative committee reassignment in October. It was to take effect after the new board was seated.

Morris said that later in the day on Dec. 6, Booth attempted to agendize multiple topics for the Dec. 18 meeting that demonstrated his attempt to attack her. One proposed topic was requesting a report about all remote workers, which was "a thinly veiled effort to oppose my legally mandated accommodations."

Although Booth did recommend that agenda item, he had asked Merchant and Enright to structure the Dec. 18 agenda. Merchant said Enright later removed that item from the agenda.

Morris said she notified the district on Dec. 9 that she had retained an attorney. After her attorney corresponded with the district, the items of concern were removed from the Dec. 18 agenda, she said.

Booth told The River Valley Times that he did not recall when district counsel informed him that Morris had retained an attorney, although it was before the Dec. 18 meeting.

That's because Enright added an agenda item to discuss anticipated litigation to the Dec. 18 closed session because of her complaint against Booth. Enright also asked Booth to recuse himself from that session, which he did.

"Apparently there is an investigation pending, but I don't know the status of that," Booth said on Jan. 7.

Morris said in her prepared statement that Enright informed her attorney on Jan. 3 that he had instructed Booth not to communicate with her. "While I appreciate the acknowledgment that President Booth's behavior is improper, such restrictions will most likely make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for me to do my job," she said.

Booth confirmed on Jan. 18 that Enright had instructed him to route any communications with Morris through either himself or Merchant. He said it came about after her absence from two committee meetings on Jan. 2. Booth sent what he considered an "innocuous" email asking her to inform him if she couldn't attend future committee meetings. He also inquired whether she had any scheduled time off in January.

"Apparently she found that objectionable, and her attorney complained to Mr. Enright," he said. ★

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

Blood Drive Slated Monday, Jan. 27

The Rancho Murieta Women's Club has slated its next blood drive from noon to 6 p.m. Monday, Jan. 27 at the Rancho Murieta Community Church, 14670 Cantova Way, Rancho Murieta.

Appointments to donate can be made online at donors.vitalant.org by using blood drive code SMFM053 or by calling Vitalant at 877-258-4825.

Walk-ins will be accommodated if space permits. Donors will receive a \$2 off coupon for Go 4 Pizza

and will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift card from Go 4 Pizza. Eat well and drink plenty of water prior to donating and bring a photo ID. If you have eligibility questions, call Vitalant at 877-258-4825 or navigate to Vitalant.org.

One donation can save more than one life. There is no substitute for blood that can only come from volunteer donors.

Bookmobile Makes Weekly Stops at Murieta Village

River Valley residents in need of a good book

need only show up for the weekly Bookmobile visit from 9 a.m. to noon every Wednesday.

The Bookmobile parks in front of the Murieta Village Clubhouse. Visitors can apply for a library card at saclibrary.org.

The Bookmobile carries a full range of books. Residents can also order books online and have them delivered via the Bookmobile.

Free Firewood Available

Rancho Murieta residents in need of firewood

can find a free source adjacent to Greens Park and behind the reservoirs, following the completion of a fuel reduction project.

After parking on the roads in these areas, residents can gather large pieces of wood lying on the ground and carry them back to their vehicles.

Wilton Bingo Games Held Monthly

February bingo will be on Saturday Feb. 1. Doors open at 6 p.m. with food available for sale and bingo starts at 7 p.m. in the Wilton Community Center

(9717 Colony Road, at Dillard Road).

All proceeds go to two non-profits: the local Park Council and the Wilton History Group.

The next bingo will be on Saturday, March 1. Questions? Call Lorraine Robinson at 916-212-8896.

River Valley Times Expands Online Coverage

Starting now, the River Valley Times will provide more timely updates on local events through its online platforms. Certain events will now be

reported within one to two days of their occurrence, ensuring that residents stay informed between the bi-monthly distribution of the printed edition.

Online updates will include a mix of brief summaries, in-depth stories and photos. Readers can access these updates on the newspaper's website at www.rivervalleytimes.com.

Follow the River Valley Times on social media on Twitter at https://x.com/RVTMPG8 and on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/Therivervalleytimes. ★

MEMORIAL

DONALD GRANT HICKSON • 01/24/1955 - 01/07/2025

Donald Grant Hickson ("Grant") of Rancho Murieta, California, passed away of natural causes on January 7, 2025, at the age of 69. He was born in Bakersfield, California, on January 24, 1955, and spent his formative years in Visalia, California, where he engaged in much mischief with his siblings, cultivated numerous lifelong friendships, excelled in a range of sports (especially baseball), and graduated from Redwood High School (Class of '73).



In the 1980s, Grant relocated with his [former] wife Pam and their daughters Carri and Melissa from Southern California to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he established a successful sales career in the nursery business and developed a love of fishing, hunting and golf. Grant later met and married the love of his life, Debbie, and eventually settled in Antioch, California. Having an encyclopedic knowledge of ornamental plants, Grant acquired a passion for gardening, which culminated in the creation of an idyllic landscape -- worthy of Sunset Magazine -- at their Antioch home. After retiring from Matsuda's Nursery, Grant and Debbie (along with his ridiculous amount of fishing and golf equipment) moved to Rancho Murieta in July 2024, which enabled them to enjoy more time with family and friends. Grant especially loved to step out the backdoor of their new home and view a herd of deer or

flock of turkeys; to watch the golfers on the 14th hole from his balcony overlooking Rancho Murieta Golf Course; and the home's proximity to five private lakes stocked with fish.

In addition to his many talents and passions, Grant was known for his love of family, tenacious work ethic, genuine warmth, down-to-earth personality, good sense of humor, willingness to lend a hand, perfectionism and admitted stubbornness. He also was known for defying physical expectations throughout his life, as -- despite his trim, 5'7" stature -- Grant could always "punch above his weight", figuratively and literally. He was much loved by his family, friends and customers and will be missed by all who knew him.

Grant is survived by his wife of 26 years, Debbie; his daughters from his first marriage, Carri (Dustin) De Marta and Melissa

(Brandon) Thorpe; stepson Ben (Heather) Reddish; three grandchildren Skylar Thorpe, Rylee Thorpe and Tyler DeMarta; two step-grandchildren Gabriel and Jacob Reddish; sweet kitty, Baby Girl; two sisters, Teresa Khachigian-Ritchie and Elizabeth Khachigian and their spouses; mother-in-law Betty L. Conrad; brothers-in-law David Conrad and Darryl Conrad and their spouses; and many nieces, nephews and other family members. He was preceded in death by his mother Glenda Khachigian and sister Denise Hickson.

A celebration of Grant's life will be held at a yet-to-be determined date and location, with details to be announced at a later time. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made in Grant's memory to the American Heart Association, Make-A-Wish Foundation, or charity of your choice.

SECURITY LOGS

Following is a summary of activity for the Rancho Murieta Community Services District Security Department for the following dates. Note: these log entries are condensed. For full security log details, go to the CSD website at www.rmcsd.com.

Jan. 8

4:37 a.m., Linksman Court: RMA rule violation. Resident parked truck and trailer overnight on street in front of home without 24-hour pass. Citation issued.

9:37 p.m., Airport: Report of black van parked by Airport. Patrol made contact with driver, who was contractor sleeping. Driver advised to move from area; driver complied and left the area.

10:32 p.m., Guadalupe Drive: RMA rule violation; resident in North back area by Clementia Hill after park hours. Citation issued.

Jan. 10

8:18 a.m., Rio Oso Drive: Complaint of suspicious person walking away from residents' home as they arrived home. Person walked by residents' home again. Patrol responded and was unable to locate individual.

9:55 p.m., Retreats: Report of Toyota minivan driving on golf cart trail by construction zone. Patrol responded; vehicle was gone on arrival; area cleared.

10:50 p.m., Riverview Park: Juveniles at Riverview Park after hours; patrol approached and advised to leave area; group complied and left park.

Jan. 11

3:29 a.m., Lake Clementia, RMA rule violation: During routine patrol, vehicle was found after hours. Vehicle left the area upon noticing patrol.

Jan. 13

3:04 p.m., Bel Air Shopping Center, Juvenile delinquency: Juveniles on bikes harassing shoppers, threatening to slash tires. Upon patrol's arrival juveniles were gone; unable to locate.

Jan. 14

4:30 a.m., Trinidad Drive, RMA rule violation: Resident parked overnight on

street in front of home, and parking unauthorized vehicle without 24-hour pass next to second vehicle in driveway; No RNC or 24-hour pass. Citation issued.

Jan. 15

3 a.m., Shell Gas Station, Juvenile delinquency: Three juveniles trying to use fake I.D. to buy cigarettes. Reporting party advised to also report to Sheriff's Department. Upon CSD patrol arrival juveniles left area; contact made with clerk for information.

4:19 a.m., Lago Drive, RMA rule violation: Resident parked overnight in street in front of home. Citation issued.

11:25 p.m., Guadalupe Drive, RMA rule violation: Resident in North back area after hours past sunset. Citation issued.

Jan. 16

2:52 a.m., Verona Drive, RMA rule violation: Resident parked overnight on street in front of home. Citation issued.

3 a.m., Colbert Drive, RMA rule violation: Resident parked overnight on street in front of home. Citation issued.

9:56 a.m., Zancada Court: Complaint of barking dog. No one home; patrol left door notice informing of complaint.

4:49 p.m., Riverview Park: Complaint of juveniles with large dogs off leash at entrance of park and reporting party concerned on being able to exit park. Patrol responded and made contact with reporting party, who advised the juveniles left area; area cleared.

Jan. 17

3:03 a.m., Pescado Circle, Medical: Resident called South Gate dispatch due to report husband fell and hit head. South Gate contacted emergency services and responded. Patient was evaluated by fire department and transported for further evaluation.

Jan 18

10:28 a.m., Post Office, Welfare check: Person sleeping in grass area, Patrol responded, confirming transient. Contact made, advising to leave area. Transient left area while Patrol monitored his movement leaving westbound Jackson Highway. ★

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County Supervisor Chair, Vice-Chair Elected for 2025

Sacramento County News Release

SACRAMENTO COUNTY, CA (MPG) - The annual vote to elect a new chair and a new vice-chair of the Board of Supervisors was held on Tuesday, Jan. 7.

This year's elected chair is Supervisor Phil Serna of District 1, and Supervisor Rosario Rodriguez of District 4 was elected vice-chair.

"I am honored to be sworn as the 2025 Chair of Sacramento County's Board of Supervisors," said Serna. "As we move forward, my priority will be to foster collaboration and unity in our community and ensure that all voices are heard. I am ready to address the challenges our county faces and build a stronger, more inclusive future for all residents. I look forward to serving with my colleagues and continuing the important work that lies ahead



At the Jan. 7 Board of Supervisors meeting, Phil Serna and Rosario Rodriguez were elected as chair and vice-chair, respectively. Photo courtesy of Sacramento County

this year."

Board chair responsibilities are listed below.

The board chair presides over the board meetings; the vice-chairperson assumes the role in the chairperson's absence or inability to act.

If the chair and vice-chair are absent or unable to preside, the members present will select a member present to act as

temporary chairperson.

The board chair also acts on procedural matters or questions, recognizes a board member desiring to speak on an item; is entitled to vote on all matters before the board, participate in discussion relating to any matter, make motions without relinquishing the chair, and second any motion without relinquishing the

chair.

The board chair also sits on other boards/commissions as a representative of Sacramento County and is the point of contact for questions from the public regarding the meetings (i.e., coordination of resolutions/presentations and general questions not specific to a district).

The chair and vice-chair serve annual terms. ★

One Driver Killed in Jackson Highway Crash

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - A 68-year-old man died and two other drivers were injured in a three-vehicle collision on Jackson Highway at Ione Road east of Rancho Murieta at about 6:47 p.m. Jan. 13.

None of the three drivers involved were local, according to Officer Trent Senter, the East Sacramento Office of the California Highway Patrol's public information officer.

Senter said a 19-year-old Sacramento woman driving a Toyota RAV4 was traveling north on Ione Road and stopped at the stop sign at Highway 16. She then made a left turn directly in the path of a westbound Buick Encore driven by a 68-year-old man from Arnold. The impact caused the Buick to veer into the eastbound

lane, where it collided head-on with a Ford F-150 driven by a 45-year-old woman from Pioneer.

Senter reported that the driver of the Buick suffered fatal injuries. The driver of the pickup sustained major injuries and was transported to a local hospital for treatment, while the driver of the Toyota sustained minor injuries and was treated at the scene.

"Alcohol/and/or drug impairment are not believed to have been factors in this collision," Senter said.

CHP blocked Jackson Highway in both directions for approximately three hours.

Capt. Mark Nunez, a Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District spokesman, said that the driver of the Buick was pronounced dead on the scene. The pickup truck driver was transported Code 2 and the third driver was treated and released on scene. ★

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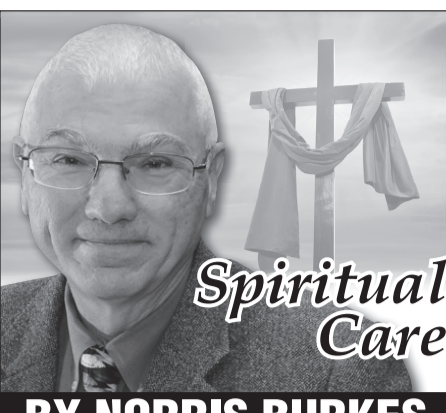


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What's it To You?



BY NORRIS BURKES

I first met Bill at Baylor University. He was a fellow ministerial student who imprinted his fraternity shirt with a mock Latin phrase, "Quid tibi est?"

In 1978, Google was still a long way off, so my fellow pledges asked him to translate it.

"What's it to you?" he asked with some defiance.

"Oh, come on," we implored, "Just tell us what it means."

Regarding us as lowly plebes, he weighted his last two words, "What's it TO YOU?"

The puzzle game went on a few minutes until we heard the literal translation – "What's-it-to-you?"

Game, set match. He had us.

But, I just shrugged it off because I'd dealt with folks like him in my past who were sanctimonious, always a self-proclaimed expert who never offered any level ground to those of us who were searching.

One of my earliest such encounters was a church youth group leader named Sherry.

She always flashed bright smile before she pitched her loaded question, "Have you received the gift of the Holy Spirit?"

The question is a fallacious one, much like the one "Have you stopped beating your wife?"

It was impossible to give Sherry a good answer. If I said, "Yes, I'm full of the spirit," she'd lay out her Bible like a religious yardstick to determine if my holy spirit measured up to hers.

If I said "No," I confirmed her first impression that I wasn't a good Christian.

Worse yet, a "no" answer brought the worst question, "Do you want to

speak in tongues?"

This question was a reference to the ecstatic and unintelligible language spoken by thousands of people in charismatic churches. But, no, I wasn't ready for that one.

I bring up the examples of Bill and Sherrie because I suspect that some of you have been turned off religion by people like them. If so, you're the victim of the loaded questions fired by the pious church goers into innocent bystanders.

These inquisitors are trying to reduce your spirituality to some kind of test that only they can pass with questions such as: "Don't you believe in Jesus? Don't you want the spirit in your life?" or "If you were to die tonight, did you know you'll go to hell?"

How do you answer questions like that from folks like this?

Fellow columnist Carolyn Hax suggests that we regard people's "nutritional label" and ask if they are worth the time. If not, she says, "Friends with a low decency content need to be treated as junk food."

I think this is true in our efforts to find a spiritual community too. Some people and places are just gonna be junk food, but we can also find quality people when we make the effort to look for them.

At the end of the day, spiritual junk food doesn't "fill" you any more than this woman's version of the "holy" spirit. You only encounter God through a spiritual relationship. And like all relationships, you ask questions, you must dialogue, you can even lose your temper, but you will also learn to laugh at yourself and forgive others.

In the meantime, to all you who've had someone discourage you from involvement with the local church, I leave with the strategy suggested in one more pseudo-Latin phrase, "Illegitimi non carborundum."

The humorous phrase originated as an informal motto in the British Armed Forces.

It roughly means, "Don't let the idiots get you down," but if you Google it you'll find a more colorful version mock-Latin aphorism that is best left out of this family newspaper. ★

Kings Korner

By V.G. Harris



Who's the hottest team in the NBA right now?! Well, if you're Steve Kerr, he's telling his Golden State Warriors it's the Sacramento Kings, as the former world champs embark on their short journey from the bay area to Golden One Arena on Wednesday night.

Winners of 9 out of the last 10 games, only the Milwaukee Bucks kept the Kings from riding a 10-game win streak.

Solid playoff bound teams like the Celtics, Bulls, and Rockets met with the defensive minded Sactown boys, and each came away wondering what just hit them.

Is there reason for optimism in Sacramento? You bet there is, and if there's one thing the Kings need to be cautious of, it's making an ill-advised trade.

You find many fans or commentators that will argue that the Kings need to strengthen their front court, and the reason is that the current alignment is not living up to their billing.

Third year player, and much lauded Keegan Murray is having a subpar season, and if he doesn't watch out, fans will stop looking at him as a 3-point shooter. As of late, Keegan has made more impact on the boards and on defense than he has as a shooter. Sadly, in a 23-point blow-out of the Wizards, Keegan contributed only 4 points and failed to connect on all 5 of his 3-point attempts.

Not to be left out, Trey Lyles, who has been playing abysmal basketball as of late, scored only 4 points as well, while taking up 20 minutes of play on the hardwood.

Once considered the Kings 3-point assassin, Kevin Huerter took a total of six 3-point shots, connecting on just one. So, Murray, Lyles, and Huerter made exactly one 3-point field goal while putting in a combined 61 minutes of play on the hardwood.

Why do I point out the negatives with the Kings winning 9 out of 10 games and climbing above the 500 mark? Sadly, none of the three just mentioned are likely to bring anything of value on the trade market.

While Keegan Murray held significant value on the trade market just one year ago, his interest and value has dropped to an all-time low, and many teams are likely

not interested in Keegan at all.

Similarly, Kevin Huerter is fortunate to make a basket from 3-point land at all, and the former starter for the Kings and 3-point specialist is likely to fall into the same disinterest category as Keegan Murray.

As for Lyles, like Keegan, he's having a subpar performance in 2024/2025, and his lack of offensive productivity will likely garnish him little interest from other teams.

Unfortunately, while teams turn away from trade offers for Murray, Lyles, and Huerter, they will be coming strong for players like Fox, Monk, and possibly even Keon Ellis.

Of all the players the Kings have currently, it's possible that Keon Ellis has the most prolific upside. Ellis remarkably is supplanting other players on the team, as a Bonafide 3-point shooter. In Sunday night's win over the Washington Wizards, all Keon did was score 18 points in 18 minutes, while connecting on six 3-point shots to lead all players from beyond the arc.

Pay attention Sacramento, and I'm talking to you Monte McNair. Keon Ellis brings game on both ends of the court.

Sabonis remains untouchable if there is such a term in NBA circles today, but the gossip surrounding DeAaron Fox needs to die down, as any trade involving Fox from this writer's perspective is a bad idea.

The Kings need to hold the fort, pay little attention to trades involving Fox and Monk, and hope that Murray, Lyles, and Huerter will return to some form on shooting acumen. Slumps don't last forever, and the fact that the Kings have played with such assiduous vigor and success over the past 3 weeks gives Sactown some much-needed breathing room.

Shout-out to Domantas Sabonis for taking player of the week in the Western Conference last week, and continuing to lead the league in rebounding and double-double's once again. Appreciate this remarkable big man, he's possibly the best we've ever had.

All the best Kings fans and enjoy this team!

Your thoughts are always welcome at vgharriskingsfan@gmail.com. ★

CSD General Manager Takes Preliminary Step Toward Lawsuit

Continued from page 1
Booth, who was told by district counsel Patrick Enright not to attend the Jan. 6 meeting, told The River Valley Times, "I categorically deny that there has been any discrimination against her for any reason."

For additional information about the Jan. 6 meeting, refer to the separate story in this issue.

After several unofficial reports surfaced that Morris had been placed on paid administrative leave, The River Valley Times asked district counsel Patrick Enright about her status.

"In response to your

questions, the Board of Directors placed Ms. Morris on paid administrative leave pending an investigation on Jan. 6, 2025," Enright emailed The River Valley Times on Jan. 14. "Her attorney filed a Government Claim with the District that is being reviewed by the District's Risk Management Authority (Golden State Risk Management Authority)."

Attorney Lawrence J. Lenneman of Rolling Hills Estates in Los Angeles County represents Morris. He and another lawyer represented two other district employees in prior employment-related

disputes. Rick Tompkins, a former patrol sergeant, and Paula O'Keefe, a former director of administrative services, settled their lawsuits before trial.

In the claim served on the district on Jan. 8, Morris seeks compensatory and other damages exceeding \$10,000, the minimum required for a case to be heard in Sacramento County Superior Court.

A three-page narrative about the claim concluded: "As a result of the Claimant's rapidly deteriorating and increasingly intolerable working conditions, it appears that RMCSO is actively attempting to

constructively terminate the Claimant."

Her government complaint includes the same allegations she made at the Jan. 6 but in more detail and with minor additions. See the separate story in this issue about the statement Morris read at that meeting.

The claim also states that a separate claim has been filed with the California Civil Rights Department, formerly the Department of Fair Employment and Housing.

Because the rift between Morris and Booth has become a personnel matter, Booth and other board members cannot comment

on her claim. Similarly, the board was prohibited from commenting after Tompkins and O'Keefe filed their government claims and subsequent lawsuits.

As district counsel Enright said in his email, "The District has an obligation to protect an employee's confidential information."

In its earlier coverage of the Jan. 6 meeting, the River Valley Times reported nothing happened. This was because, after the board returned to the open session, Enright announced that the board had discussed the three agenda items "and we have no reportable action."

After unofficially learning that Morris had been placed on paid administrative leave, The River Valley Times asked Enright who made the decision and

when it occurred.

Responding on Jan. 14, Enright said that the board placed Morris on leave on Jan. 6.

Although Enright stated he couldn't comment further because it was a personnel matter, The River Valley Times questioned why Morris' administrative leave had not been publicly announced, as it appeared to constitute an "action." Enright did not respond.

However, the following day Enright addressed the matter publicly at the Jan. 15 board meeting. He announced that the board had voted 4:0 during the Jan. 6 closed session to place the general manager on paid administrative leave.

He also confirmed that Booth didn't attend the special meeting. ★

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Coaches Praised for Driving Soccer Club's Growth

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - "Bigger, better and younger" are likely the most fitting descriptors for Rancho Murieta's 2024 youth soccer program.

Doug Mattos, the club's program director for 12 years, credited the success to the coaches for creating an enjoyable experience for both the kids and their parents throughout the four-month season. It began in August and ended in November.

"When you have so many kids sign up, it reinforces that you are all doing the right thing," Mattos said. "We had the best year for signups in 10 years."

The sign-up numbers were impressive, with 222 players this year compared to 196 last year, which is an increase of 26 kids. Of those, 114 were girls and 108 were boys, organized into 17 teams, three more than last year. The growth also allowed for two teams in each age group.

"For the first time we had multiple kids in multiple age groups for both the boys' and girls' teams," Mattos said.

"We also have over 127 kids playing in the ages U6 to U9 (under 6 and 9 years old)," Mattos added. "Over half the club is in the younger ages, which is great for the future of soccer in RM."

The Mini Kickers Program, which introduces three- and four-year-olds to soccer, grew to 61 participants this year, six more than last year. The program was led by Elk Grove Soccer coaches Ross Gibb, Dougie Best, Chad Myers and Oliva Mattos. Additionally, more than a dozen community teenagers volunteered, earning community service hours in the process.

Prospective coaches, mostly parents with a child on the team, must choose to volunteer, Mattos explained. After a full day of work, they commit to two night practices during the week and games on Saturdays.

Parents with busy schedules also face a choice when deciding to enroll their kids in the program. According to Mattos, the greatest compliment a coach can receive is when parents sign their kids up to play on their roster for another season.

Mattos said they begin reaching out to find coaches in July and August after forming the teams according to age groups. This year, seven new head coaches volunteered: Adam Smith, Doug Braddock, Brittany Bunnell, Joshua Weidenbach, Brandon Tafoya, Danny Kershaw and Dan Stephens.

Another nine returned: Kaitlin Bauer, Chris Betzler, Kurt Bunnell, Tony Driver, Josh Twist, Dennis Brown, Meghan McDonald, Tara Iverson and Rick Spickard.

"My number one job is to make sure all of the good people stay involved, because it makes it easier for everyone," Mattos said.

Mattos noted that most head coaches have been volunteering for three or more years. Their experience helps in recruiting new volunteers when new teams are formed for incoming age groups. Instead of making the pitch himself, Mattos directs potential coaches to these seasoned volunteers for a first-hand perspective.

Coaches of older players sometimes opt to take their teams to tournaments, requiring additional commitment from themselves, the players and their parents.

"It extends the season with three weeks of practice under the lights when the weather is getting colder," Mattos said. "It is a testament to what the coaches are doing to make an experience for the kids."

Five teams, the most ever, participated in a tournament in Davis on Dec. 7 and 8: the RM Hawks, Unstoppable Divas, RM Mustangs, Murieta Mayhem and RM Jaguars.

Mattos noted that the program had fewer local referees this year, mostly going off to college. However, three teens, Kate Myers, Dylan Kershaw and Christian Stigler, continued to referee. The Elk Grove Soccer League also provided referees to cover their games.

Mattos expressed hopes of expanding the local referee program, seeing it as a valuable way for young people who have aged out of youth soccer to stay involved. It also offers them an opportunity "to put a little extra money in their pockets by working on Saturdays."

Mattos credited Tony Driver, who was already coaching two teams, with helping the 2024 season run more smoothly by handling tasks such as lining the fields and moving the goals.

"He was my right-hand person. I couldn't have done it without him," Mattos said. "I call him a sports field junkie... He likes everything looking good, so he was a natural to help me."

Mattos also acknowledged the Rancho Murieta Association Maintenance team for making Stonehouse Park a special place to play soccer. For many years, the Rancho Murieta Association lead was Rod Hart, who has since been promoted to general manager. The current lead, Troy Schaffner, worked closely with Mattos, who said



The Rancho Murieta Jaguars, coached by Tara Iverson, left, and Candice McEachron pose for a group photo before playing in a Davis tournament in December. Photo courtesy of Tara Iverson



Three and four-year-olds have a ball learning about soccer in the Mini Kickers Program. Photo courtesy of Ashley Glen



Melissa Kassel, the Rancho Murieta Mustangs coach, encourages her players to focus as they practice for a tournament in November 2023. File photo by Gail Bullen



Entering a post-season tournament requires team members to practice for an extra three weeks in chilly temperatures and under the lights at Stonehouse Park. File photo by Gail Bullen

he called Schaffner at least once a week during the season.

"I don't know what is about the RMA guys. They are drinking from the same well because they really do care about the kids," he said. "They are out there making sure the fields are good, and that we have anything we need on game day."

Mattos also recognized Elk Grove Soccer, led by Board President Debra Carlton and CEO Andrew Donnary, which oversees numerous neighborhood clubs and more than 6,000 players. This year, Elk Grove Soccer assisted the Rancho Murieta Club by replacing its old soccer goals with new ones and ensuring all other equipment was up to date.

"We get a ton of support for making sure we grow the program out here," Mattos said.

This support was in place even before Mattos joined the Elk Grove Soccer board of directors in 2024. He was re-elected to the board this year.

Two coaches and a Mini Kicker parent also shared their thoughts about Rancho Murieta Soccer.

Tara Iverson, who recently completed her sixth year as a coach, originally agreed to coach for just one year when her 5-year-old daughter's team lacked a coach. "It's been a wonderful, wonderful opportunity growing alongside these girls," she said. "The players and the families make it so worth it."

Iverson said she took her team to the

Davis tournament for the second time. "We didn't even place or win a game," she said. "But it was very fun. Our girls had a blast."

Iverson noted that Mattos often emphasizes this point to her.

"Yes, of course you want to foster a way for these girls to improve their skills and learn the game of soccer, but more importantly, you want them to have fun while they are out there," she said.

Iverson praised the Rancho Murieta Club for being well-organized.

"It's been such a testament and a wonderful thing to see how Doug runs the organization as a whole, how many people sign up, and the coaches that serve under him," she said. "It's been fantastic, and we will probably continue doing it as long as he is here."

Ashley Glenn said she enrolled her now 4-year-old in the Mini Kickers program in 2023, based on the recommendation of her brother and sister-in-law, both coaches. She appreciated that the sessions were held on Fridays and that the schedule was adjusted as needed for lights or weather.

Following a recommendation from Mattos, the coaches adjusted how the lessons were run this year. The kids were divided into three smaller groups, each staying with the same coach throughout the session.

"So they got really quality time without being in a huge massive group trying to do one drill at the same time," she said.

Her oldest will join a team next year, and the 3-year-old will become a Mini Kicker.

Glenn expressed her admiration for Rancho Murieta Soccer after her experience with the Mini Kickers program and watching her nieces and nephew play.

"It's always run really well," she said. "I think Doug does a great job organizing and managing everyone."

Brittany Bunnell, a first-year coach for a team of 7-year-olds, found the experience somewhat easy because the rules for that age group are simple. "It also was somewhat hard because I have never played soccer," she said.

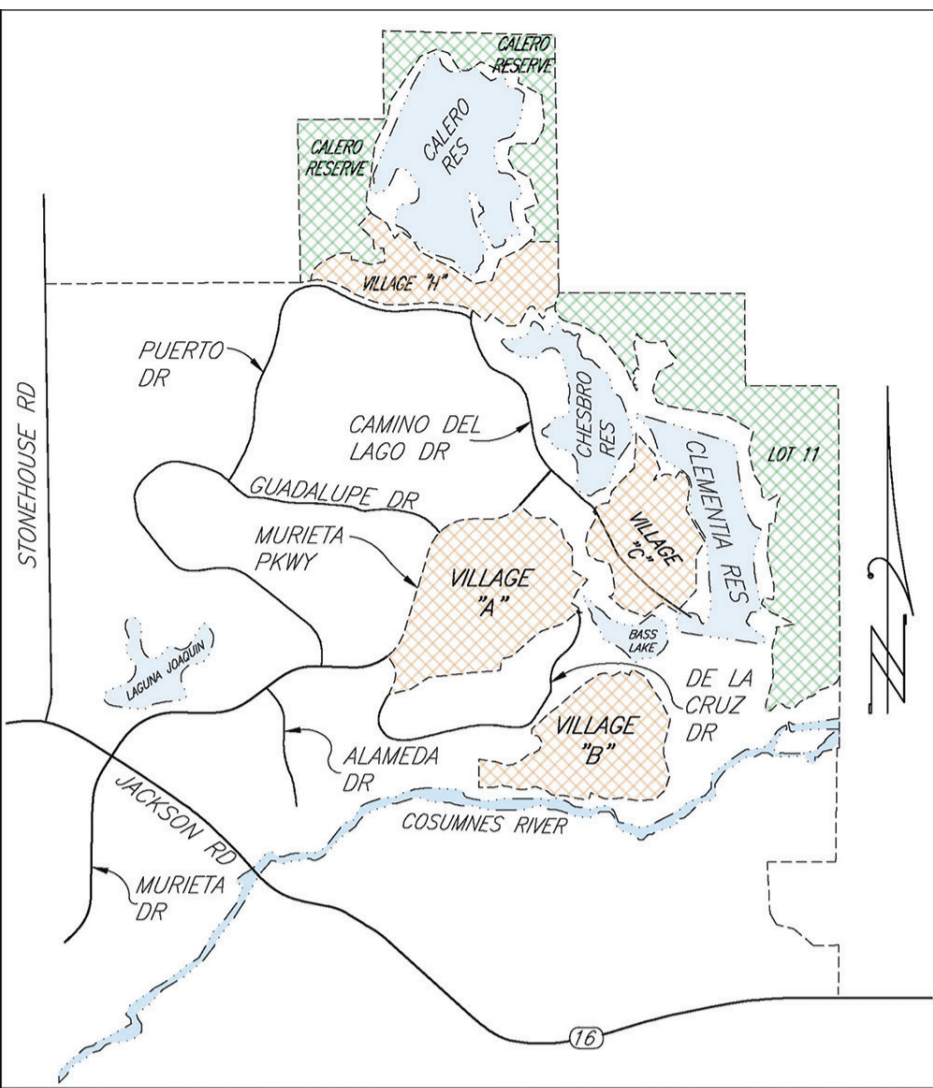
Bunnell said she and her assistant coach used an app to find recommended drills for the kids. "But there also is good old YouTube as a helpful resource," she said.

As a parent, Bunnell said she loved helping her child develop both physical and social skills while spending time with her, her friends, and other kids in the community. She found soccer to be an excellent way to foster teamwork and build relationships, both as a parent and as a leader within her daughter's peer group.

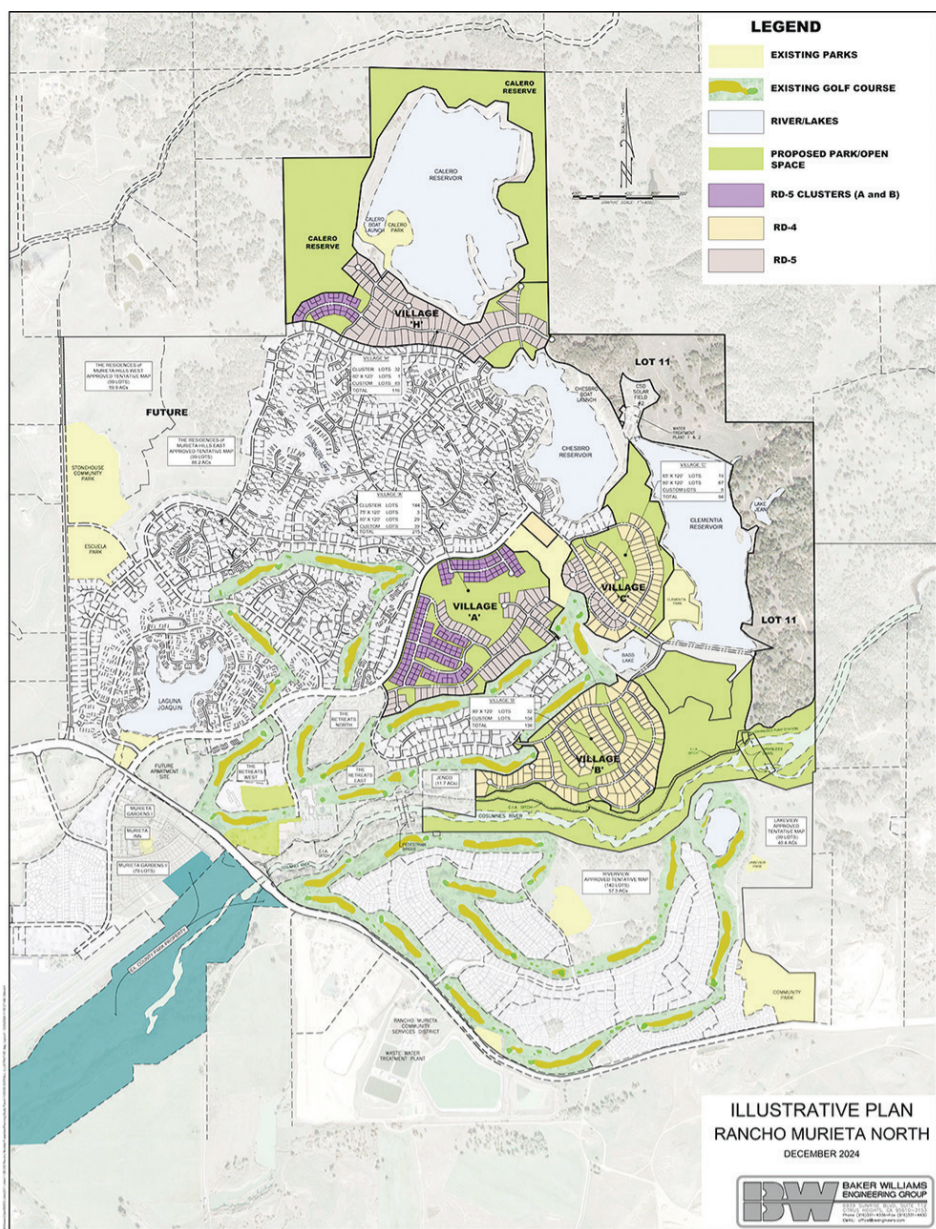
The Rancho Murieta Club was founded 22 years ago by Paul Frank, Martha Glunt and Sam Sommers Jr.

"They got it started by putting the best experience on the field that the community would embrace, and we are just continuing it," Mattos said. "That's why it has lasted 22 years."

Development Behind Reservoirs Is Ruled Out



The most recent application for the Rancho North subdivision shows that development behind the reservoirs is no longer planned. The area affected is Lot 11 in green. Courtesy photos



A color map also shows the changes in the application filed with Sacramento County on Jan. 9. Villages A, B, C, and D have become Lot 11, shown in gray

Continued from page 1
Disposal, and his thoughts on water.”

In addition to his position with SOLOS, Merchant also is a member of the Rancho Murieta Community Services District Board.

When asked if he planned to engage further with Merchant and the entire board, Dyer said, “Definitely.”

According to Dyer, the meeting was initiated after Bob Keil, the developer of the Residences subdivision, requested that he update Merchant on the revised application for the

proposed Rancho North project. Rancho Murieta Properties representatives Tony Valez and Jeff Pearson also attended the meeting.

Dyer described the meeting with Merchant as very productive.

“I appreciate his time and insight,” Dyer said. “He cares about the community and I hope he realizes that I do too.”

Dyer noted that in October, Rancho Murieta Properties decided to remove Villages D, E, F and G from the county application. He publicly announced the change

during a question-and-answer session held at the Murieta Inn in early December. Carol Anderson Ward, the primary investor in Rancho Murieta Properties, also addressed attendees at that meeting.

However, the public was not notified about that meeting, and the Rancho Murieta Country Club Board was not invited, even though the second half of the private meeting focused on the club, according to Rancho Murieta Country Club Board President Eric Dutton.

Save Our Lakes and

Open Spaces was established after Rancho Murieta Properties filed a 2014 application with Sacramento County to build 925 homes.

Cheryl McElhany, a retired educator and now president of the Save Our Lakes and Open Spaces board, played a key role in organizing the group’s formation in 2015.

In a 2015 interview with the River Valley Times, McElhany explained that Save Our Lakes and Open Spaces was founded with two primary goals. The first was collaborating

with Rancho Murieta Properties and local regulatory agencies to modify the development plan, ensuring that construction around the community’s three reservoirs would not proceed.

The second was to build a coalition dedicated to permanently acquiring and preserving the lakes, trails and open spaces.

McElhany said her group wasn’t opposed to development.

“We want responsible development. Don’t put in high-density homes around our most valuable

resources,” she said.

In recent years, Save Our Lakes and Open Spaces has shifted its focus to advocating for a sustainable and reliable water supply for the community, addressing challenges posed by climate change and ongoing drought conditions.

Merchant recently led a petition drive urging the board to declare a moratorium on development. McElhany presented the petition to the Community Services District Board at their Dec. 18 meeting. It included 2,025 residents’ signatures. ★

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