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5th District Supervisor Candidate Views

Wise Water Use

By Rue Furch

Nearly twenty years ago, I was a founding member of a small committed group of business, political and environmental leaders. We gathered in response to both repeated sewage spills, and Santa Rosa's determination to continue to discharge its wastewater into the Russian River. We called ourselves "Citizens for Responsible Water Use," with the ambitious goal of reversing the irresponsible practice of misusing our beautiful Russian River as a ditch. We produced practical reports detailing the value of our water resources, particularly the Laguna de Santa Rosa and the Russian River. As a part of that effort, I convened a group of Chamber of Commerce representatives from Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Occidental, the Russian River and Bodega Bay. We met monthly to hash out the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions. Ultimately we all agreed that the best alternative to Santa Rosa's dilemma was to USE the treated wastewater -- not "dispose" of it into the River or the ocean.

This was the first broad-based effort to document and advocate alternative solutions to Santa Rosa's wasteful River discharge practices. We got the City's ear and we made a difference. What I learned was that marshaling broad-based groups is an effective way to influence public policy.

Several years later I convened a similar group with an even more diverse group of stakeholders, and once again we challenged Santa Rosa's efforts to use the River via the Laguna, as their preferred wastewater disposal option. That group, called "Stakeholders Consensus On Reuse," played an effective role in persuading Santa Rosa to reuse their wastewater. The City then chose to pump it to the Geysers and increase urban reuse. This was not the perfect solution, some would say, but we avoided discharge into the Russian or into the ocean via Estero Americano.

The more you look at what makes a healthy Russian River, the more you realize that the River can't be healthy unless its tributaries are also healthy. Unfortunately, a shortage of federal and state resources is making it hard to restore the creeks and streams that feed into the Russian River. As a private citizen, I was a founding member of the Russian River Watershed Council. Our goal has been to look at the big picture of Russian River including its tributaries. Among our achievements is a 50-year master plan to protect these creeks and a GIS data system that tracks what is happening to them.

As your supervisor, I will speed up the formation of watershed groups, volunteers who will focus on each stream and put together a restoration plan for it. I will, as I have done before, find the money to support these local efforts.

The agencies tasked with protecting the River sometimes have competing agendas. State agencies and the Sonoma

County Water Agency are seeking to permanently lower the Russian River in summer by cutting back on releases of water from upstream dams. I opposed extending the experiment because I felt no one had taken a hard look at the consequences of lowered flows to people, businesses, wildlife and fish. Together, we provided enough information to convince the Department of Water Resources to allow low flows for only one year, instead of making low flows permanent.

Officials last year encouraged county residents to conserve water because of the drought, but there was no moratorium on building or approving new subdivisions or shopping centers. The water agency continued to ship Russian River water to Marin County and has even talked about adding new contracts.

As your Supervisor, I will fight for a countywide "water budget" that will stop any increased exportation of water until we know we have enough for our own county. I will advocate for requiring potential big water users to show there is enough water in wet and dry years for existing homes, farms and businesses before we allow them to develop.

As a planning commissioner, I successfully pushed for the first-ever Water Resource Element in the county's General Plan (the rule book when development decisions are made). As a result, water will be considered a resource in its own right -- something Sonoma County has never been required to do before.

We must continually remind ourselves how much the Russian River means to our lives and how easily we can put it in peril. Officials last month shut down the pumps that provide drinking water to thousands of West County residents when a black stain of unknown origin appeared in the Russian River. As it turned out this time, fortunately, the substance was dirt from a freshly plowed farm and the pumps were promptly turned back on. But we can never forget the intimate link between the health of our West County businesses, homes and people and the health of the River.

I've lived in Sonoma County since 1970, and I've worked for over 35 years -- as a mom, as an environmental leader and as a planning commissioner -- to protect the river we love. When I'm elected Supervisor I will work to restore the quality of the Russian River and the streams that flow into it. I will fight to maintain our water supply. That means I will never agree to allow more water from the Russian River to be sent outside our community unless we are very sure there is enough left for those of us who live and work here.

I believe that together we can protect and enhance our river and the quality of life it brings. I'd love to hear your ideas and perspectives. Please email me through my website www.ruefurchforsupervisor.com. I'm listening.