

Seeking Balance Saving Water

By Bill Wadsworth

The Occidental Community Service District (OCS D) board has resisted for two years the efforts of a small group of its ratepayers to bring their water rates into compliance with California conservation standards and the California Constitution. Facing the salmon fishery collapse and the second straight year of Russian River water shortages, a small group of Occidental ratepayers have taken action by appealing to state agencies for help.

This small group of climate change conscious citizens has been successful in getting the State Water Resources Control Board (WRCB) to take a statewide precedence setting action by requiring water conservation pricing as a part of the OCS D water permit. This action will reduce Occidental water consumption and provide protection for the salmon in the Russian River, Occidental's water source.

This new water conservation requirement attached to a water permit is a statewide precedence setting event establishing firm ground on which future climate change responders throughout the state can stand to require conservation water rates to be attached to water permits. In fact, we are hopeful that the WRCB will start adding this requirement to all new permits. When districts receive valuable California water via a permit in the future, we are closer to assuring that they will have the state mandated requirement to conserve the water because of the actions of a few local West County folks.

Why Conservation pricing?

We are experiencing a salmon fishery collapse and a ban on salmon fishing in the California coastal waters for the first time. We have experienced the driest spring on record which causes the County Water Agency to call for a second consecutive year of water use reductions through the summer so that their will be enough water this fall to support the salmon spawning season. The EPA reports that conservation measures can reduce water use by 19%. Climate change experts maintain that several million appropriate, small, individual climate change responses can save an entire species. We are told each person and each community must do their small part.

What about development?

Occidental's new water permit sets the stage for development in Occidental. Thiessen Homes has a 32-unit development project which includes 2,500 square foot houses placed on small lots which will begin soon. In addition, the OCS D board has started the process

to expand their water zone in order to bring 222 additional acres into the zone including seven parcels some of which can be further subdivided.

These two expansions of water service will double the Occidental water use, requiring OCS D to provide a Source Capacity Planning Study to the State Department of Public Health. Russian River Utility, Occidental's water service contractor, maintains that this study will be costly and recommends raising the residential service charge to pay for the study's cost. Such action would make Occidental rates even further out of compliance with the constitution and conservation standards.

The purpose of this study is to determine if there is enough capacity for the developer's projects. The issue now is who should pay for these development-related expansion costs: the developers or the existing ratepayers. Since the WRCB conservation-pricing mandate doesn't begin until July 2009, the ratepayers who don't want to pay for these development-related expansion costs, need to attend OCS D meetings the 3rd Tuesday of each month, 7:00 PM at the Firehouse downtown. The next meeting is scheduled for May 20th.

Conservation Pricing

The constitutional and conservation pricing problems at OCS D arise from the district having a very high monthly service charge and volumetric charges which are too low. All residential customers must pay \$44 each month regardless of how much water they use. The Russian River Utility has recommended OCS D raising that to as high as \$79. The \$44 service charge causes the smallest ten users to pay 18 times more for a gallon of water than the big ten users and the big ten use half of the systems water. Low volumetric charges do not discourage waste. The conservation-pricing mandate will cause the service charge to be lowered and the volumetric charge increased. A tiered water rate structure could also be implemented.

The Water Resources Control Board (WRCB) has mandated that OCS D either implement California Urban Water Conservation Council's Best Management Practice #11 or another pricing structure which meets the same goal. The goal of BMP #11 is that the service charge must not be more than 30% of the total revenue received from the total of the service charge and the volumetric charge. Occidental is out of compliance with this standard by receiving 70% of their revenue from the service charge. If this is not corrected by July of 2009 than the WRCB will issue a cease and desist order on OCS D water use.

What's Happening at Forestville's Speers

OK, I've been avoiding this question because it seems so personal - like it's none of my, or anyone else's, business. But in essence - what happens at our local supermarket impacts the community... so I asked, because I get asked nearly every day.

Yes, the economy is down and everyone is suffering except the oil companies and a few others - like arms manufacturers. Gas prices alone are making every item on any store shelf cost more. The housing slump may not seem like it would hit the local market - but in a back-street way it has. Like so many businesses, grocery stores get credit extended to them in order to fill their shelves. The turn-around is usually quick enough that the items hit the shelves, turn into cash in the drawer and go back to the supplier. Those suppliers aren't taking risks any more. They want to get paid when the item changes hands. Our little market can't do that right now.

Those who have been around a bunch of years know that this store was owned by Forestville's Speers family. It passed through generations, so money made was money in the pocket or turned around to stock shelves. When Allen, Sue and Steve bought the store, they bought it from the Speers and it cost them credit dollars. They have monthly payments just like a mortgage. That gets paid first before anything else - even buying food. When Anne Marie decided to close the butcher/deli, Allen and Sue knew they had to buy her out - they needed the equipment. So let's pile another "mortgage" payment on top.

Then we have the double-edged sword. Can't buy enough food to stock the shelves and people stop coming by to purchase what IS there. I'm a light eater and quite honestly, what's IS there is the kind of food I eat. I shop often so I have fresh ingredients, but like everyone else entering the store - I notice the near empty shelves.

So what's a local store to do?

They are ramping up the deli section with fresh, prepared foods. People, especially single people, like to come in and buy lunch and dinner ready to heat and eat. You can now. The produce department is consistently stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables, many brought in right off the farms of Sonoma County growers. I spent a fair amount of time today talking with Luis Gudiño, a Sebastopol organic farmer and produce broker who sells to Speers. All the dairy products are consistently on shelves, as are breads. Like both Sue and Allen stated - the outside edges of the store are full - it's the center shelves with canned and boxed prepared foods that are spare.

So, personally, I'd like to see our home town think about the long-term benefits of supporting our local food market - in addition to supporting all the other local merchants who strive to serve our needs. Instead of stopping at the big stores on the way home from work, how about waiting until you are home. Quite honestly, you'll save a lot of money. There are so many less impulse items that surprise people when they get the total at checkout.

Save Gas - Shop at Home

Everyone is having a hard time making ends meet, so how about saving gas and shopping at home. Think of all the stores in town as your own convenience markets - from fresh lettuce at Speers to tacos. Many of us literally don't shop outside of our home towns. Perhaps we just live simple lives. But if we can do it, how many others can.

Every community within the readership of this newspaper is filled with shop owners striving to meet our needs while making a living. If we want the convenience of having what they sell close to home in the future, then we need to support them in the present. Remembering that "we're all in this together" is good to keep in mind.

Home towns are like family.

We don't always get along...we don't always agree...we don't always share the same goals - but we feel the bond and stick together through thick and thin.

When we sit down together at big holiday dinners, we agree to keep conversation civil. We share in the tasks at hand, and in doing so, we are reminded of the value of family. That each individual is worthy of our love, even if not our admiration. By being tolerant we feed the healthy side of our families. By being supportive, we keep our family whole and moving forward into the future. When we are kind, we know that kindness will be returned to us when we feel the need.

If we think of our home towns and our neighbors as a whole of which we are part, then we see the value in taking care of our own. If we want them to be there for us in the future, we need to be there for them in the present.