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## Bleak Outlook for Lafayette's Baseball Fields

By Cathy Tyson



Lafayette Maintenance Supervisor Greg Travers, left, with Public Works Director Mike Moran admire the green, for now, grass at Buckeye Fields. Photo Cathy Tyson

Now four years and counting into California's drought, it's clear that we are all in this together, even Little Leaguers. "We are in super crisis mode," said Maintenance Supervisor Greg Travers, who is in charge of Lafayette's public baseball fields. Since March, Lafayette Little League has had players large and small on both the Buckeye Fields baseball diamonds and at the Community Park.

Declaring a severe drought emergency last week, the East Bay Municipal Utility District ordered customers, municipal and residential, to cut back landscape watering to two times per week. Use less, pay more: starting July 1 rates will increase 8 percent and a special drought surcharge of a maximum of 25 percent will be levied on household bills. The problem is that historically during the warm summer months, the grass at Buckeye gets watered five days per week to keep up with warm temperatures and a constant parade of baseball players. The city has an investment in these public fields, which were paid for by taxpayer dollars - the

fields that thousands of local children have enjoyed over the years.

Starting in October of 2014, Travers proactively met with EBMUD, sports leagues' staff, and the Parks Trails and Recreation Commission to discuss this situation, noting that the fields were at a crisis point already, three years into the drought. "There is just no good news," said Travers, who is very sympathetic. He played baseball as a kid. With a two day a week watering schedule, he predicts the grass - even the more rugged and drought-tolerant hybrid Bermuda grass at Buckeye - will be in marginal shape, possibly making the fields unplayable. With hundreds of kids running around on the grass week after week, there are compaction issues and inconsistent surface that can morph into safety hazards the moment a ball takes a bad hop.

"We'll evaluate the safety of the field at that point," said new Public Works Director Mike Moran. "It certainly won't be as alive as we would like it."

With the possibility of dead fields this summer, the question becomes what to do next year? There have been some preliminary discussions between the city and Lafayette Little League about installing artificial turf, but the situation is unclear at this point.

"I would really like to see gray water used," said Parks, Trails and Recreation Director Jennifer Russell about recycled water. She explained that the city would have to install a complete set of pipes to transport that water and, unfortunately, that's not an option. Having a fleet of tanker trucks driving from the Central Contra Costa Sanitary facility in Martinez to water all of the grass at baseball fields is also not a viable solution, explained Moran; however there are certain small areas downtown that are not hooked up to irrigation. Expect to see recycled water used there.

It is possible that Mother Nature delivers a cooler summer, which would help the situation, according to Russell. Even if the Bermuda grass is brown on top, the roots can remain alive. Aside from the irrigated five acres of baseball field at the Community Park, the balance of the park is planted with California native vegetation that only gets watered via clouds.

The city is trying a variety of approaches to address EBMUD's mandatory 25 percent cutbacks. Moran reports they will diligently be reading water meters to detect underground leaks, and repair where needed. The healthy green landscaping installed just last year on Mt. Diablo Boulevard

medians have hopefully become established, and the city will continue to modify irrigation to drip from spray heads to minimize over-spray.

Unfortunately, from time to time, a less than observant driver careens up over a curb and into median landscaping, and in doing so, breaks a sprinkler head or pipe. "We rely on residents letting us know, so please call and report issues promptly," said Moran. He and Travers will be delivering a report to the Lafayette City Council in early May about the city's water reduction strategy.

Nelsy Rodriguez, public information officer with EBMUD, confirmed the maximum two day per week landscape limitation for municipalities, including their sports fields. The utility does offer lawn conversion help for homeowners of up to \$2,500 to remove a lawn and replace it with native, drought resistant plantings. However, that program does not extend to artificial turf.

In addition to the city-owned sports fields, schools will be facing the same dilemma, a maximum of two days per week watering. Fields throughout Lamorinda will all be affected.

See something, say something. To report a leak on city-owned property in Lafayette, call the Public Works Department at (925) 934-3908.

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