

Local Nonprofit's Environmental Impact in Contra Costa County

By Sophie Braccini



Lafayette senior planner Michael Cass appreciates the work done by 4CL. Photo Sophie Braccini

Lynnda Deschambault's passion for nature was cultivated at a young age – and it has never waned. Eight years ago, when Deschambault was vice mayor of the Moraga Town Council, the state started asking cities to incorporate a climate action plan into their code.

In response, Deschambault created the Contra Costa County Climate Leaders (4CL), which facilitates the sharing of best practices for greenhouse gas emission reduction policies in Contra Costa County cities and trains various young people. Her only regret is that her hometown of Moraga is not, in her opinion, leading the pack of climate leaders.

Lafayette Senior Planner Michael Cass says that 4CL acts as a facilitator, doing the legwork and bringing the experts to the table so staff can be educated on topics such as electrical charging stations, the PACE (property-assessed clean energy) program, and waste reduction efforts. “(The nonprofit) really has focused on educating city staff and city officials,” said Cass, who until recently was in charge of environmental affairs for Lafayette. “They put on some presentations on multiple topics. They touch on a variety of

issues and try to focus on what the pressing issues of the moment are. They provide the expertise and facilitate relationships with stakeholder groups.”

“The councilmembers in our small town are all volunteers, and no one has the time to do the research needed to craft new legislation,” Deschambault said, “so I started looking for what was already out there in terms of climate action plans that we could use. Then I created fact sheets about existing legislation that others could use on a website, and we started holding information sessions for local municipal staff, and it's just grown from there.”

The nonprofit facilitated setting up the California Youth Energy Services (CYES) program this past summer that trained young adults to conduct free energy audits in homes. “The 4CL pushed to have Lafayette participate, but it cost a minimum of \$20,000 to participate and we didn't have the budget,” remembers Cass. “Then 4CL helped facilitate a grant opportunity and urged Moraga to partner with Lafayette and do a joint application so we could conduct the program without having to come up with the money.” Over 250 households participated and several local youth were educated in the process.

Deschambault sees youth education as the second priority for 4CL. Over the past eight years she has hired several interns, many from Saint Mary's College. “I have political science and environmental science seniors working with us to complete their senior projects,” says Deschambault. “Others stayed with us several years and really gained valuable experience.”

Jency James started working with 4CL in 2012, during her sophomore year at Saint Mary's College where she studied environmental science. “I helped plan some of the workshops, spoke at many council meetings, and met with city staff,” says James. “I learned that the grassroots bottom-up approach really affects change. The plastic bag ban is

a good example of it; it started in one or two small towns, then the state saw that it worked and adopted it, and now it is spreading to the whole country.” James said she learned many valuable skills during her years with 4CL. “I learned how to put on an event, to create fact sheets, to do public presentations, to make our voice heard.” James graduated in 2015 and now works for Republic Services as a recycling coordinator, working with apartment complex and condominium residents, among other things.

Deschambault has a full-time job with the Environmental Protection Agency, so sometimes 4CL can be a lot of extra work, but she feels that she is part of something that is bigger than herself. “Cities like Richmond, El Cerrito or even Martinez are doing so much,” she says, noting that El Cerrito has added a full sustainability chapter to its general plan. She says the financial impact of projects is studied, but the environmental impact is also systematically analyzed. She sees these cities taking the lead in Contra Costa County.

As for Moraga, she says the progress has been in baby steps, but she congratulated the council on Nov. 18 when it passed the small farm animal ordinance. “It's all linked,” she says. “Food production, water, waste management, all have an impact on energy production and greenhouse emissions.” Upcoming topics for 4CL include open space, water, and partnerships between cities and business communities. For more information, visit <http://www.cccclimateleaders.org>.

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This interactive, intergenerational gathering is meant to simulate the intensity and chaos of a nighttime festival. There is no set schedule; rather, families are welcome to come and go as they please. While at Night in Bethlehem, they will encounter shopkeepers, Roman soldiers, and beggars, all of whom have gathered in Bethlehem in accordance with the Roman census - and maybe, just maybe, these families will catch a glimpse of the holy family whose journey to Bethlehem gives our own journey to this city all the meaning in the world.

Questions? Contact Ryan Timpte at ryan@LOPC.org or (925) 283-8722 x234

Tenants Criticize

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“Our community has been decimated,” said resident Karen Kern who called the complex a “no play zone” and unfriendly to children.

Complaints regarding new 20-plus-page leases cite such unusual items as a “moisture control policy” regarding plants in apartments, \$70 trash fee per month, and a requirement to clean toilets once per week. Kern said she would love to talk to Sack staff, but they have gone through three property managers in the past year and are unresponsive.

One tenant with a background in forensic accounting went to the trouble of researching the inequity of water and trash charges, which are the same for a one-bedroom unit as a three-bedroom unit. She found the actual costs that the complex is paying and did the math: according to her calculations, actual garbage collection cost for each unit is \$43.33 per unit, per month, however Sack charges \$76.11.

Lafayette resident Matt Siegel, who is an attorney for the Berkeley Rent Stabilization Program, described the “lease breaking fee” as “absolutely illegal.” He describes the organization as “incredibly mismanaged” and “totally tone deaf.” He explained that all tenants want is stability, but called the 27-page lease with onerous terms “despicable.”

No one from Sack Properties attended the meeting. Theresa Karr of the California Apartment Association made it clear that she was not representing Sack Properties, but noted she is in touch with Kirby Sack. Although unable to comment on the renters' complaints, she did say, “I guarantee that you'll get something from

Sack Properties explaining all this.”

Pointing out that they are not doing themselves any favors by not being here, Mayor Brandt Anderson called the situation astonishing: “There is abuse going on here.”

“This appears to be a bad actor that we need to deal with,” said Andersson, adding, “This is not acceptable in our town.”

“The hope was we had an owner that was ethical, fair and reasonable; this is not reasonable,” said Council Member Mike Anderson. He agreed with that this is an abusive situation that needs to be looked at by the owner, acknowledging that she may be unaware of what is going on.

The Mayor wrote a blistering letter to complex owner Kirby Sack calling the new and excessive charges an “orchestrated work-around that delivers maximum revenues to the company at the expense of long-term tenants.” The letter, sent days after the Nov. 23 city council meeting, requests Sack personally attend the next meeting in January to respond to the charges.

“Without counterbalancing testimony from you, the City Council was left to conclude that many or most of these allegations have merit,” concluded Andersson.

The meeting wrapped up with the council directing the city manager to review with the city attorney what all of the legal options are, including a potential rent moratorium to be discussed at the Jan. 25 City Council meeting. Several messages were left with Sack Properties along with an in-person visit. As of press time, they had no comment.

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