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Giving Dreams an Address

EBMUD Ceases 'Outing' of Water Wasters

By Nick Marnell

The East Bay Municipal Utility District board voted unanimously April 26 to suspend its Excessive Water Use Penalty Ordinance, the controversial program that fined customers who used more than 1,000 gallons of water a day.

Though the district mistakenly reported inflated water usage by some of its customers at times, and residents of areas with larger lawns complained that the ordinance was unfair, one highly publicized aspect of the program

that most riled up customers was the release of the names and addresses of the water wasters to media outlets. Even the district board was torn on the use of such negative reinforcement.

"If the purpose was to shame the customers, and for some board members it was, then it served its purpose," said director John Coleman, whose Ward 2 includes Lafayette. "The fact is that in every past drought when we ask our customers to cut back, they all do on an equal basis regardless of where they live. We would have achieved the same results without the 'outing' of names and addresses."

EBMUD spokeswoman Andrea Pook defended the use of the program, claiming that over 70 percent of users who appeared once on the excessive use list did not return. "They took positive action that resulted in water conservation" she said.

Director Marguerite Young of Ward 3, which includes Moraga and Orinda, agreed.

"I do support the use of this approach in future droughts as one tool of many," she said. "Only 1.2 percent of our customers were subjected to the penalty

but the savings achieved were considerable." EBMUD said that its customers reduced water use by 24 percent compared with consumption in 2013.

The district suspended the excessive use penalty effective May 3, though the ordinance will remain on the books in case EBMUD needs an emergency conservation tool to respond to future droughts. Coleman says he will again refuse to vote for the release of the names and addresses of violators.

"No, I will not support such a proposal," he said. "First, I believe it violates the personal rights of an individual, and furthermore, it potentially creates a situation in which the individual or their family could be put in jeopardy of harm from an individual that may be mentally unbalanced."

The Lamorinda Weekly received the names and addresses of excessive water users from the district but declined to publish them. The most recent EBMUD excessive user report included 25 addresses in Lafayette, two in Moraga and 17 in Orinda.

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