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OPEN FORUM

A healthier S.F. Bay is within reach

By Andrew Gunther, Alexis Strauss
Hacker and Jay Davis

It was major news in August when a hazardous algae bloom turned San Francisco Bay water a murky brown color and killed a reported 10,000 yellowfin goby, hundreds of striped bass and white sturgeon, and a small number of endangered green sturgeon.

That kind of attention may seem understandable today, but just a couple of generations ago, it's likely barely anyone would have noticed. Why? Because fish die-offs used to be far more common.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, huge fish die-offs were reported in San Francisco Bay almost every year, with over 100,000 fish dying in 1965 alone. Our bay had become a dumping ground for minimally treated sewage, industrial wastewater, polluted runoff and solid waste — unfit for aquatic life and unsafe for swimming. This was the state of the bay for decades. A 1941 report described it as “obnoxiously and notoriously foul and an affront to civic pride and common decency.”

But California stepped up. In 1969, our Legislature passed the Porter-Cologne Act, giving the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board the power to protect and restore our region's waters. The federal government added momentum in 1972 through the Clean Water Act and, within just 15 years, the bay showed stunning improvement. After investments exceeding \$3 billion in federal, state and local funds — including advanced wastewater treatment plants — bay oxygen levels increased while bacteria and toxic metal concentrations sharply declined. The use of chemicals such as DDT and PCBs, poisons to the aquatic food web, were also outlawed.

By 1982, shellfish could be harvested in San Mateo County for the first time in 50 years, and by 1987 most areas were safe for people to enjoy swimming again during the summer. In the 2000s, improvements continued as other pollutants were controlled.

These game-changing achievements represent hard work by many people, including regulators, scientists, wastewater dischargers, environmental advocates and others. The nonprofit San Francisco Estuary Institute, for example, has been providing scientific support and tools for decision makers to understand and tackle complex environmental issues since 1985. This support includes a unique regional monitoring program that tracks the health of bay waters. The institute's work has earned



Brontë Wittpenn/The Chronicle

Thousands of fish in Lake Merritt and throughout San Francisco Bay were killed by an algae bloom in August.

national acclaim and has helped make the bay one of the best-monitored waterbodies in the world.

A cleaner San Francisco Bay required not only the treatment of discharge by specific facilities but also the runoff from urban areas during storms. In 1990, the regional water board issued a permit to control the amount of pollution flowing from Santa Clara County to the bay — the first permit of its kind in the nation. Since then, an enhanced regional stormwater permit, encompassing most of the Bay Area, was enacted and is fine-tuned every five years. Copper toxicity in the bay, largely from the use of the mineral to manufacture brake pads, has been reduced through the Brake Pad Partnership — a collaboration of government agencies, manufacturers and environmental groups.

The health of the bay has, thankfully, improved a lot since the bad old days. But if Bay Area residents truly want a healthy bay, there's still much work to be done. Historical mining in the South Bay hills left a legacy of mercury contamination that, along with residual levels of PCBs and other long-lived

chemicals, makes it unhealthy to eat too much fish caught in San Francisco Bay. Runoff during winter storms can contaminate water bodies with bacteria, causing temporary restrictions on water-contact recreation. We also need better control of nutrient discharges that contribute to algae blooms like the one we experienced in August.

Pollution problems are particularly acute in disadvantaged communities, which unjustly bear the burden of decades of systemic racism that led to heightened exposure and inadequate cleanup measures. To promote public health and justice in our region, it is critical to address the inequitable distribution of pollution impacts.

Climate disruption is bringing elevated water temperatures, extreme weather events and rising sea levels. With rising seas, groundwater along the margin of San Francisco Bay will also rise, imperiling human health

and vital infrastructure.

The Clean Water Act and other measures helped reverse the dangerous trajectory we were on. But the challenges remain formidable. To achieve fully fishable and swimmable waters, we must build on past successes with an ardent commitment to observation, measurement and action.

Improving our well-being, nurturing robust aquatic life and restoring clean water are still within reach, but the task is enormous. It's going to take all stakeholders — from residents to community leaders to state agencies — working together to keep our region's waters healthy and resilient for the future.

Andrew Gunther and Alexis Strauss Hacker are members of the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board. Jay Davis is a senior scientist at the San Francisco Estuary Institute.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR Submit your letter at SFChronicle.com/letters

Stop Big Oil from undoing environmental law

In a glaring example of using money to interrupt the political process, Big Oil is spending some of its excess profits from high gas prices to try to overturn a law that protects millions of Californians.

When we see danger or injustice, we often say, “There ought to be a law!”

That's what families living with oil drilling next to their homes said for decades. After a yearslong fight, they were finally able to celebrate a new law that ends “drilling where we're living.”

SB1137 imposes a 3,200-foot buffer zone between drilling sites and people's homes and neighborhood buildings. But within a few days of the bill's enactment, the oil industry put a stop to that celebration, filing a referendum to undo this long-awaited law.

The industry's message is designed to be deceptive. Paid signature gatherers ask people to sign a petition to help lower gas prices or to stop the energy shutdown.

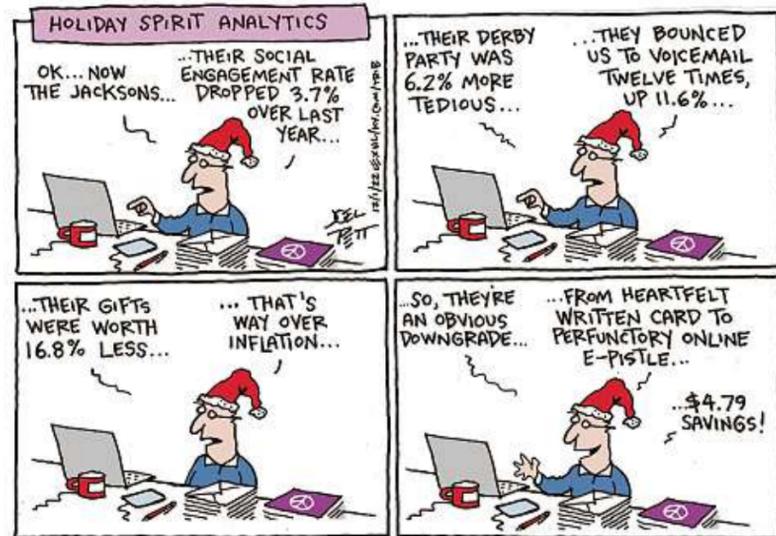
Big Oil has until Dec. 15 to gather enough signatures to put the referendum on the ballot. Please don't undo SB1137. Don't sign this petition.

Deborah Silvey, Berkeley

Halt solar proposal

The California Public Utilities Commission is scheduled to vote Dec. 15 on new rules to govern rooftop solar generation. It has claimed, in step with the utility industry, that one of its goals is to make the consumer cost of electricity more equitable.

The commission claims that affluent households are the primary beneficiaries of the current rooftop solar regime.



Joel Pett/Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader

A new Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory report, however, undercuts this dubious claim.

The lab's research shows that residential labor's research shows that residential adoption doubled in so-called disadvantaged communities, the report said. It is quite extensive and eye-opening; I recommend that the interested reader, commissioners and the governor review this report prior to the upcoming hearing.

Clarence Boyd, Oakland

Keep S.F. elections chief

Regarding “Election chief sacking a wake-up call” (Open Forum, Nov. 29):

During this past election season, I called the San Francisco Department of Elections four times, and each time a human being responded within seconds and provided the answers I needed.

At the time, I commended them, exclaiming, “So there's really a bureaucracy that works!”

Describing Elections Director John Arntz's exceptional service, Danny Sauter's Open Forum alerts us to the need to change the City Charter so that the Elections Commission and other bodies don't have the power to sabotage what works well for everyone in this city.

Meanwhile, don't let Arntz go!

Tina Martin, San Francisco

\$1.7 million and counting

Regarding “Official demands to flush out figuring for \$1.7 million potty” (Bay Area & Business, Nov. 30): As a Noe Valley resident, I can attest we desperately need a toilet in this parklet. I can sympathize that the cost seems high given the scope and nature of the project.

However, what people failed to grasp is that with this continuous political finger-pointing, the project is going to cost taxpayers more than \$1.7 million — if it even gets built.

Things cost more when they take longer and when you have too many cooks in the kitchen; all this public hearsay and posturing is only adding to the bottom line.

If Gov. Gavin Newsom et al. truly cared about the budget of this project, they would have done better to keep this internal instead of arguing about it in public.

Does the San Francisco Department of Public Works need an overhaul? Yes. Is any of this going to cost taxpayers less for a toilet? Absolutely not.

Madison Smith, San Francisco

Stop the robot wars

Regarding “‘Killer robots’ OKd for SFPD” (Front Page, Nov. 30): The escalation to killer robots by the good guys means the bad guys will soon have the same devices, right?

I am not looking forward to reading about the Battles of the Killer Robots where humans simply watch the chaos. Didn't we learn anything from Hal in “2001: A Space Odyssey”?

Beau Leonbart, San Francisco