

December 31, 2015

Drought, housing crisis top Petaluma new stories of 2015

By Matt Brown



Petaluma Valley Hospital, 2008

Events of the past year in Petaluma seem to set the stage for a busy 2016. While next year promises to be monumental with a major election, several large transportation projects coming online and potentially drought busting rains, 2015 passed relatively routinely, although with plenty of stories to keep Petaluma on its toes.

For most of the year, the city and the region were parched by a record drought that was only slightly eased by late fall rains. A housing crisis also gripped the Bay Area, and Petaluma leaders struggled to come up with solutions to the problem.

Major transportation infrastructure projects moved forward through Petaluma, laying the groundwork for some big ribbon cuttings next year. At the same time, a countywide effort to pass a tax to pay for road repairs failed, leaving Petaluma leaders to ponder a local measure for next year. Leaders of Petaluma's only hospital also launched a process to determine the future of the facility, an effort that promises to bear fruit next year.

Devastating wildfires in Lake County brought Petalumans together to assist their neighbors. Other groups also came together to revitalize Walnut Park, a storied Petaluma landmark. Petaluma's largest school district and its teachers' union worked out a new contract while welcoming a new superintendent. Meanwhile, residents enjoyed fine art, film and the expansion of a defining craft beer industry.

Prolonged drought

As the western United States entered the fourth year of a crippling drought, officials at all levels of government called residents to action. Gov. Jerry Brown in April ordered a mandatory 25 percent reduction in urban water use, imploring Californians to take drastic measures to curb their water consumption.

Petalumas responded to the challenge by cutting water use by 27 percent, just above the mandatory goal, in June, and staying ahead of the curve through the rest of the year. The city added to its network of

recycled wastewater pipes that serve parks, cemeteries and golf courses, the largest municipal water users. The city also expanded its Mulch Madness program to encourage residents to replace lawns with drought-tolerant landscaping.

"If people didn't irrigate their lawns and outdoor plants, we wouldn't have this problem," Dan St. John, Petaluma's director of public works, said in April.

Portending a wet El Niño winter, rains finally fell in late December, but not before workers finished the final 100-foot section of flood wall in the Payran neighborhood. The \$40 million U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project is designed to protect properties from the devastating floods that have wracked Petaluma in past decades.

Housing shortage

Another regional issue felt acutely in Petaluma this year was the housing crisis. A lack of new housing in the city in recent years pushed vacancy rates for rental housing to less than one percent. The lack of available housing effectively drove average rents steadily upwards to around \$1,700 for a one bedroom unit.

In May, 300 business, nonprofit and government leaders from across the state convened in Petaluma for a summit to discuss solutions to the housing shortage.

"We have a situation where the rents are too high for most low income people," Petaluma City Councilman Dave King said in May. "We need more apartments, but there's not a ton of space left to build within the city's boundaries."

Voter-approved limits on expanding Petaluma's borders outward were designed to encourage infill development, and Petaluma officials this year approved housing projects that will add around 1,700 new units within the city when fully built. Among them are a 34-unit development on North McDowell Boulevard that was nearing completion at year's end, a 144-unit apartment complex on Maria Drive and a 150-unit apartment building on Baywood Drive, including low-income units, that was approved in November.

Petaluma officials hoped the new housing would ease the pent up demand next year.

Movement in transportation

The year began with several large transportation infrastructure projects under construction in Petaluma. At the north end of town, a Caltrans project to replace and widen the Old Redwood Highway interchange at Highway 101 caused massive headaches for motorists. When it was finally completed in August, the smooth, four-lane, \$40.9 million overpass made everyone forget the complicated lane changes among heaping mounds of dirt and construction equipment.

"You can see the improvements. It was short-term pain for long-term gain," Supervisor David Rabbitt said in August.

Meanwhile, at the other end of Petaluma, workers continued to replace the Petaluma River Bridge, a complicated \$130 million project that has involved multiple traffic shifts and lane closures. The year comes to a close with two-thirds of the new bridge open for traffic and the final piece expected to open in the spring.

The project will leave a wider Petaluma River Bridge, but will not add any carpool lanes until Highway 101 to the south is widened, a project that still lacks funding. In December, transportation officials said they had identified a source for \$20 million in state funding to build nearly 5 miles of carpool lanes from the Petaluma River to the Marin County line.

The stretch of Highway 101 widening through Petaluma, however, still remains \$85 million short, and officials have yet to identify a funding source for that project, which includes an underpass for a future Rainier Avenue extension. The Petaluma City Council in August, approved the environmental document for the long-planned Rainier crosstown connector, insuring that project can move forward whenever the highway is widened.

The Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit system, a 42-mile commuter rail line between Santa Rosa and San Rafael, also inched closer to completion in 2015. The most visible piece, the replacement of the Haystack Bridge over the Petaluma River, was finished in September. SMART used a 157-foot span purchased from a railroad in Texas to replace the aging 111-year old bridge.

As SMART trains began testing the newly laid tracks in October, the bridge project was proven to be a success. More testing is expected next year before passenger service is scheduled to start next December.

Failure of Measure A

While local roads in Sonoma County and Petaluma remained in poor condition in 2015, county leaders pushed for a sales tax measure on the June ballot that would have raised \$20 million per year, including \$1.9 million in Petaluma, for road repairs. Voters roundly rejected Measure A by 61 percent, many saying they were unhappy with the proposal as a general tax, meaning the revenue could have been spent on any county priority.

“The problems began with the strategy chosen to promote the measure,” Dan Drummond, executive director of the Sonoma County Taxpayers Association said in April. “Rather than specifically committing any tax proceeds from Measure A to fund road repair ... the supervisors are asking us to trust them that the money would be used for roads.”

In the wake of the failed countywide measure, Petaluma’s elected leaders began discussing a local sales tax measure for next November’s ballot that would be used to fix the city’s crumbling streets. Early indications show that voters would prefer a sales tax with a specific spending plan to pay for streets and the Rainier project.

Future of the hospital

The Petaluma Health Care District, which owns Petaluma Valley Hospital, embarked on a process to select the next operator of the city’s only acute care facility once the 20-year lease with St. Joseph Health expires in early 2017. In May, the district requested proposals from potential hospital operators, including proposals to purchase the hospital from the district.

In October, the district announced that four providers had bid to take over operation of the hospital: Sutter Health, Prime Healthcare Services, Strategic Global Management and incumbent St. Joseph Health. “I believe we have four viable candidates, and we need to move on to the next phase in the process,” Ramona Faith, district CEO said in October.

The district launched a series of workshops in December to explain the bidding process to the public. Healthcare district officials have indicated they will select a top choice in the first half of next year, which will then be put to voters.

Community rebuilding

Two events brought the Petaluma community together in a spirit of giving. The first was the devastating Valley Fire that started Sept. 12, burning 76,000 acres and destroying 1,000 homes in the Middletown and Cobb area. Several Petaluma residents lost second homes in the area. But for full-time Lake County residents, the fire wiped out all that they owned.

“When I crawled into bed in Petaluma, I knew that my neighbors living up there lost everything,” Petaluma resident Elece Hempel, who lost her Cobb home, said in September. “There’s nothing left in those neighborhoods. I’m sad about our house, but at the end of the day, it’s my neighbors that I’m worried about.”

The greater Petaluma community also worried about their neighbors to the north and launched fundraising drives and donated food and clothing to Valley Fire victims. Several Petaluma-area fire agencies, including Lakeville, San Antonio, Wilmar, Rancho Adobe and Petaluma, sent personnel and equipment to fight the Valley and other Lake County fires this summer.

The Petaluma Animal Services Foundation sent members to Lake County to care for pets and livestock displaced in the fire.

Petalumans came together again in 2015 to rebuild Walnut Park, a historic public space near downtown that had fallen into disrepair in the lack of city funding. The Petaluma Service Club Alliance, a group of local organizations, adopted the park, raising \$180,000 in materials and in-kind labor to fix the gazebo, revamp the playground and pave over the rutted asphalt with smooth concrete. The year-long effort culminated with a ribbon cutting in October. Major donors included Friedman’s Home Improvement, Lagunitas Brewing Company and Shamrock Materials.