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Voter Guide: Santa Clara Valley Water District

Water district candidates focus on drought, flooding

by Sue Dremann / Mountain View Voice

The winner in the race for a single seat at the Santa Clara Valley Water District will take on major challenges if elected to represent District 7 this November. He will face a deepening drought and lingering problems with downstream flooding when the rains do come.

The two candidates, incumbent and board Vice Chairman Brian Schmidt and challenger Gary Kremen, are seeking the seat that largely covers the north county, includes the cities of Palo Alto, Mountain View, Los Altos and Los Gatos. And they have very different styles when it comes to tackling the major issues.

Schmidt, an environmental attorney who has served on the board since 2010, takes a detailed approach that favors collaboration; he has represented the district on flooding issues at the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority and is on the district's Water Conservation Ad Hoc Committee, which drafted the district's response to the drought.

Kremen, board president of the Purissima Hills Water District in Los Altos Hills and a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, prefers an aggressive tack that would use political influence to rise above foot-dragging bureaucracies to get the problems solved.

Their campaign spending also reflects their approaches. Schmidt has spent modestly, garnering \$13,000 in campaign funds and spending only about \$8,000; Kremen has amassed a war chest of more than \$280,000, most of it self-funded.

The candidates sat down for interviews and shared their views about their experience and approaches to district problems.

Brian Schmidt

A Mountain View resident, Schmidt has spent 15 years working on environmental and clean-water issues. He said he has tried to make the board more transparent since his 2010 election. He made the motion to change board meetings from mornings to evenings so that more of the public could attend.



Election Day is Tuesday, Nov. 4. Polls are open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Absentee or vote-by-mail ballots must be received by Election Day, and may be turned in at polling places.



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And he supported cutting the board's pay, reversing a 2008 pay increase. The pay cut passed on the second vote, 4-3.

In keeping with his strong opinions about environmental cleanup, he supported the treatment and removal of toxic mercury from Jacques Gulch, a former gold-mining site in the south county identified by state and federal agencies as a major source of mercury contamination for San Francisco Bay and the Guadalupe River Watershed.

During his term, the board succeeded in getting Measure B passed with 74 percent voter approval. The parcel tax is estimated to bring in \$548 million by 2028 for flood control, seismic retrofitting for the Anderson Dam and environmental improvements. The district will use some funding, combined with other sources, to contribute about \$28 million toward the San Francisquito Creek flood-reduction project. Measure B funds will also go toward levee replacement and repair and wetland restoration in Shoreline Park in Mountain View.

Staff at the Regional Water Quality Control Board, which must grant the permits to begin the San Francisquito project, have so far rejected the plan. Schmidt has represented the water district on the matter and drafted responses to try to bring the impasse to a conclusion. But he is measured in how aggressively the district can attack the problem on its own. The San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority is the lead agency on the project, and the water district is a member, along with three cities in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

Schmidt said he believes negotiation is still possible with the regional water board, and he doesn't yet support political arm-twisting, unlike Kremen. He is working to investigate whatever is bothering the water board staff, he said.

But he is not shy about criticizing the water board. In response to an Aug. 23 news story about Palo Alto officials blasting the water board's inaction, Schmidt wrote: "I find it incomprehensible that the regional board is showing such a poor understanding of hydrology as to think we could proceed right away with a project that protects East Palo Alto while failing to do construction along the Palo Alto golf course area. This would change the flooding pattern to increase impacts in Palo Alto and therefore required new environmental review and many other delays, including forcing yet another permit application to the Regional Board."

Schmidt said he is happy to have his work in the district judged, in significant part because of his work as part of the Joint Powers Authority and on the creek.

"I hustled to get environmental support for a broad compromise that included extensive funding for San Francisquito Creek," he said of his work on Measure B.

Schmidt was at City Hall last year when the Mountain View City Council considered -- and approved -- the plans for a flood detention basin at McKelvey park. Schmidt was there with water district engineer Afshin Rouhani to urge the city council to accept the plans, which he said would help keep hundreds of property owners from paying \$1,200 in flood insurance costs each year. Plans for another basin at Cuesta Annex proved extremely controversial and were ultimately dropped.

Schmidt said the project was an important step towards getting some 2,720 Mountain View residents out of a flood zone, but that the district in general spends too much time, and money, on planning and design. Half of the whole project's costs, he said, will likely be spent before construction begins.

Schmidt said he was instrumental in drafting a water-district plan to deal with the drought.

"I led a change before the drought that increased conservation rebates. I later wrote the memo that doubled many of our water-conservation rebates, which quintupled the response for lawn replacement. We're vastly expanding recycled water, and I'm advocating treatment of wastewater to drinkable levels -- a new, drought-proof water supply," he said.

The board approved a countywide, water-use reduction target of 20 percent of 2013 water usage, and Schmidt supported two years of water storage, which he said puts the district in a good position.

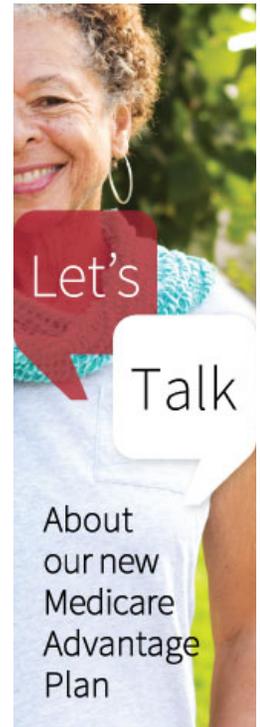
But the district's 2013 carryover and 2014 allocations of state water are currently frozen to protect the Delta, leaving three water districts that depend on that banked water without that source, according to water-board documents.

The water district is now developing the California Aqueduct Reverse Flow project to ensure the water in its storage bank is available for treatment plants and to prevent groundwater depletion.

Gary Kremen



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The Match.com founder has garnered considerable notice for his run, as much for his sizable self-funding of his campaign as for his stand on the issues. But Kremen is clear that he wants to see major change in how the water district does business.

Board president of the 6,400-customer Purissima Hills Water District, a water retailer in Los Altos Hills, Kremen touts his experience as a Silicon Valley entrepreneur as one of the reasons he'd be an asset to the board.

Kremen is chairman of WaterSmart Software, a tech company that creates water-meter software used by many city utilities. A leak-detection company he was involved in was recently bought by Badger Meter, he said.

"It's all part of a broader platform that I've been doing in sustainability in the last 10 years," he said.

Kremen also started Clean Power Finance, the largest company in the U.S. in solar financing.

"What I like to do is do big things that move the needle in sustainability, and I think this water district kind of needs to get off the old 1920s model and needs innovation," he said.

If elected, he said he would take on a California State Water Project tax he says is unfair to Palo Alto, Mountain View and Los Altos residents, who receive most of their water from the Hetch Hetchy water system through the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and not through the state. Only Mountain View's water -- 10 percent of it -- comes from state sources.

"The water-district board gets the money from the State Water Project, and the district as a whole gets the benefit but not us as a member of the district," he said.

Kremen said he would work to get more conservation funds for districts that use Hetch Hetchy or remove the tax entirely from Hetch Hetchy districts. The water district could get increased water-recycling money and use it to put in gray-water systems in homes, and it could receive water-conservation dollars to extend some of the recycled water across Foothill Expressway into areas of Palo Alto and Los Altos Hills, he said.

Schmidt has characterized Kremen's solutions as unrealistic. The other six board members would not vote for a tax exemption or increased funding to help the north county district, he said.

But Kremen said they might do "some horsetrading," albeit within the confines of the Brown Act.

"People had some needs that were not being met," he said of discussions he has had with board members.

Building coalitions on a regional level will be key to getting things accomplished, and the water district should be using its clout, he said. He pointed to the district's handling of the Regional Water Quality Control Board, which recently denied permits for the San Francisquito Creek flood-control project.

"The water district is the one with some good money. They have discretionary money, and they have their own lobbyist in Sacramento. They touch a lot of people in politics more than other people do," he said.

"We may need to use the water district's political muscle and money to do a legislative end-run around this issue."

The Regional Water Quality Control Board might need to be defunded from looking at the San Francisquito issue or their regulatory purview might need to move someplace else, he said.

"The water district has not spearheaded doing that. I would take it away from (the Regional Board) if they don't move," he said.

Kremen has criticized the water district's handling of the Permanente Creek Flood Protection Project in Mountain View, which proposed four flood detention basins at Cuesta Park Annex, Blach Intermediate School, McKelvey park and Rancho San Antonio. The plan faced stiff opposition from residents who did not want their parks turned into flood basins, and frustrated City Council members when water district hydrologists redid the calculations and determined they never needed a basin at Cuesta Park Annex in the first place.

Kremen said the proposed Cuesta Park Annex flood basin was a "debacle" and that the district failed to listen to the local community. He said it has also been a wasteful project, and that the district has spent \$20 million prior to construction because of all the delays and redesigns.

Kremen is also critical of the water district's approach to the drought. Despite 2012's Measure B funding, the district hasn't started upgrading Anderson and Calero dams.

"In the event it rains, we can't even store all the rainwater because the water district has not fixed its dams" for seismic safety, he said, as it is required to do by the state Division of Safety of Dams. The district cannot keep the water higher than 20 feet below the dam crest until the repairs are made, he added.

Kremen also called the water exchange, the one that involves banked water and the Delta, "a debacle."



"Instead of focusing on local or regional water storage, the stored water at Semitropic Water Storage Bank is near Bakersfield, hundreds of miles away from us. This water is critical because the Santa Clara Valley district depends on the Semitropic water for 25 percent of its treated water," he said.

But Schmidt said that assertion is misleading, saying that in the majority of years, 5 percent or less of the district's water supply comes from the groundwater bank.

"When we established the Semitropic account 20 years ago, we knew there were limitations on its availability but that it was still valuable. For example, we withdrew quite a bit of that water last year and transferred it to local storage as part of general preparations for scarcity," Schmidt said.

Barring some disaster, the district will get the Semitropic water in November, Schmidt said.

If elected, Kremen would focus on additional stormwater capture with groundwater percolation, regional recycling and reuse, recharging groundwater basins and desalination, he said.

He added that he would also focus on eliminating fiscal waste and abuse within the district, especially holding board members and the CEO accountable.

--Kevin Forestieri contributed to this report

Comments

Posted by **Jay Ess**

a resident of another community

on Oct 22, 2014 at 3:10 pm

 4 people like this

Gary Kremen is a few years too late. Where was he when the SCVWD Board was called the Golden Spigot? Brian's election a few years ago has done much to correct the problems of overspending, and board ignoring of the public. New personnel have been on top of problems and Brian's environmental knowledge has changed much of the boards direction. I am proud to be a supporter for Brian.

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Posted by **mel**

a resident of Monta Loma

on Oct 22, 2014 at 4:13 pm

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am suspicious of someone who spends over 1/4 million dollars to get elected to a water board
mel

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Posted by **SRB**

a resident of St. Francis Acres

on Oct 23, 2014 at 8:32 am

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@Jay Hess - agreed 100% - enthusiastically voted for Brian.

One thing is certain we need flood protection.... against big money trying to buy out elections.

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Posted by **Mike B.**

a resident of Old Mountain View

on Oct 24, 2014 at 1:54 pm

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Brian seems most to enjoy taxpayer funded trips to Washington DC to meet the First Lady. He also is editor and contributor of a blog that tolerates hateful comments against the military and Brian himself has written several politically bigoted rants against "the right" in the fine tradition of Ed Schultz. I thought we would want a more balanced politically neutral board member.

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