



NEWS

Bolinas RVs get water approval

by **Ben Stocking**
June 14, 2023

A plan to build emergency housing for Bolinas farmworkers has cleared a major hurdle, with local utility regulators approving water service for the project despite the village's strict limits on water consumption.

The board of the Bolinas Community Public Utility District approved water permits for the temporary R.V. park despite concerns raised by some residents who fear it would strain the town's limited water supply, especially in the event of another drought. Supporters of the emergency project say affordably priced housing is urgently needed for the 61 ranch residents, nearly all of whom are Latino.

The Bolinas Community Land Trust plans to place the R.V.s at 130 Mesa Road, a 20-acre parcel of grazing land adjacent to a ranch where residents have been living for years in substandard housing without proper plumbing or septic systems. The trust hopes to purchase the ranch by the end of the month, tear down the substandard housing and replace it with affordably priced homes, moving the residents out of the trailers and dismantling the park.

Because Bolinas has a cap on the number of water connections in town, the trust needed to combine two connections to provide a sufficient water supply. On May 31,

the utility board voted unanimously to approve combining the two connections—with limits on usage—provided the trust completes the purchase of the ranch. One connection currently serves the ranch, which was once owned by the Tacherra family but has since fallen into receivership. The other serves 130 Mesa Road.

The town has had a moratorium on new water connections since 1971. The trust's new permits restrict the amount of water available to trailer park residents according to a formula that considers the previous three-year flows through each meter. District staff determined that the supply was sufficient.

Combined, the two connections would provide trailer park residents with 28.5 gallons of water per person per day, or 3.5 gallons more than they have been using at the Tacherra ranch. That amount is considerably less than the statewide median of roughly 48 gallons per day. Annie O'Connor, the executive director of the land trust, said the trust's other four properties in town have averaged 21.5 gallons per person per day.

With water service all but guaranteed, the trust is likely to move quickly to buy the 46-acre ranch property, Ms. O'Connor said. "The water permit was the key to everything else moving forward," she said. "We are now moving forward without a moment's hesitation."

The county approved an emergency coastal permit for the trailer park in May, several months after code enforcement inspectors found extensive health and safety violations at the ranch, where residents live in unpermitted, haphazardly constructed outbuildings and aging trailers.

The trust has a purchase-and-sale agreement for the property and hopes to consummate the deal by the end of the month. Before it installs the R.V.s, the trust must apply for county building and septic permits. Though it typically takes months for the county to review such applications, the process could be hastened by the project's emergency status. The trust hopes to move people into the trailers by September.

The proposal has widespread support, but people on both sides wrote comments and spoke at the public hearing conducted by the utility district. Several expressed concern about straining the village's limited water supply—and the prospect of another drought.

Mollie Lounibos urged the board to postpone its decision while the community considers alternatives, including possibly housing the Tacherra residents in Bolinás's many short-term rentals and asking the county to foot the bill.

“I am eager to hear how interpretations of current BCPUD formulas could assure the requested water amount and uphold the water moratorium,” she said. “My hope is that this is possible, but my research indicates that it is not.”

Don Smith, a former member of the board, explained that the moratorium does not limit the amount of water a customer can use—it only caps the number of meters that can be installed. The amount of water available to a customer is only restricted during drought or when someone applies to renovate or replace a house with an existing connection.

The two water connections should be sufficient to supply the R.V.s and the permanent housing, he said. Ranch residents have been conservative in their water use, he added.

“All of these fears about breaking the moratorium are unsubstantiated,” Mr. Smith said. “The land trust is not asking for anything special here. They are asking the BCPUD to apply the same standard that they would apply to any customer.”

Supporters of the plan outnumbered those who spoke against it.

Mickey Murch, who runs Gospel Flat Farm, urged the board to grant their approval and back the housing plan. Mr. Murch grows produce on his family's land and leases land on the Tacherra property, where he employs some ranch residents.

“Supporting this project is supporting local food,” he said to applause. “We're really excited to have the B.C.L.T. be our landlords.”

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