Where the SEWAGE Meets the SEA

Stege Sanitary District and the Growth of the East Bay

Stege Sanitary District
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100th Anniversary 1913-2013

DAVID WEINSTEIN

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Stege Sanitary District, which incorporated in 1913, four years before the city of El Cerrito, is one of the oldest special districts in the Bay Area. It serves close to 33,000 people in a five and a half square mile area.

Its story tells of a grassy hinterland that boomed with residential growth and professional vice in the early 20th century before becoming by mid-century, a well-mannered, mostly residential suburb.

It's also a story of growing environmental awareness, as Stege and surrounding sewer agencies shifted from the dumping of raw sewage into the Bay to increasingly effective ways of keeping Bay waters clean. Stege, small district that it is, emerged as a leading innovator in these efforts, and remains innovative today.

On the occasion of its 100th anniversary, the people of Stege Sanitary District, would like to offer this history of their district to their customers —and to the world at large.

Dedicated to Judge William Huber and Alfred G. Baxter

Stege Sanitary District

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The view south along San Pablo Avenue from about Hill Street. The "Flying A" station is on the right and the well-known "Louie's Club," run by Louie Nicoli and Lou Favero, is on the left.
El Cerrito Historical Society

CHAPTER 1

A Million-Dollar Headache

It was an exciting time along San Francisco Bay. The convulsion caused by World War II was over. The shipyards were closing. GIs were back home, including such local heroes as Ernest Navellier, a ball gunner on a B 24 Liberator, a veteran of 50 combat missions over enemy territory in Europe.[1]

No longer was the El Cerrito Journal reporting local boys killed or missing in action —flyer Bill Tom, "one of the beloved older boys" from El Cerrito's Chung Mei Chinese orphanage, missing in action over Austria, merchant seaman Robert Weir, a well-liked painting contractor, manacled and tortured on the deck of an enemy sub after his ship was torpedoed in the Pacific.[2]

The war workers who'd built ships and tanks in Richmond were moving out of temporary war housing, freeing up land for development—including the sprawling tract that had formerly housed Black Jack Jerome's dog racing track in El Cerrito.

Developers had their eyes on San Francisco Bay itself. Henry Kaiser, who hoped to keep running his Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, proposed giving the shipyards a new neighbor—an international airport built on fill that would replace much of the bay between Berkeley and Richmond.

If the Second World War had rocked the Berkeley-West Contra Costa County area, and it had, sending the population soaring and converting marshland to shipyards, the post-war boom was expected to do the same, and then some.

The area served since 1913 by Stege Sanitary District, directly across the bay from San Francisco and just north of Berkeley, still retained a touch of country. The city of El Cerrito, the heart of the district, had 6,100 people in 1940 and 16,600 in 1944—its greatest growth spurt ever, an increase of 160 percent. (Though some people departed right after the war, as war housing closed).

Still, even as the war ended, its hills were largely barren of homes and it still had remnant dairies and farms, many "without proper sanitary precautions."

"Cows," one neighbor complained, "were tethered in any vacant lot and so near sidewalks that pedestrians must go around them to get by."[3]

In other territory served by Stege, the Richmond Annex, which was part of the neighboring city of Richmond, and No Man's Land, an unincorporated wedge between El Cerrito and the Annex, winter rains brought devastating flooding from creeks, storm drains—and sewers. Although liberally dotted with houses dating to the Teens, No Man's Land still had marshes, empty lots, and rowdy

roadhouses that housed gamblers and prostitutes.

In the year after the war, Kensington, then and now an upscale enclave of hillside homes along with two small shopping districts, retained hillsides and ridges that were windswept and barren.

But local leaders didn't expect, or want, the area to retain its rural, outlaw atmosphere for long. Depression or no, El Cerrito boomed through the mid and late 1930s, 166 new homes in 1938, an all-time high, followed by 240 in 1939. Most of the homes were in small tracts in the more-or-less flatlands, though builders began moving up slope.

"… if you don't believe El Cerrito has some excellent hill lots too, you should stroll up on the hillsides overlooking the bay sometimes," the El Cerrito Journal advised.[4] Then came the war, and homebuilding increased.

As the war neared its end, boosters expected growth to accelerate even more. New tracts were proposed with homes not in the dozens but the hundreds.

At the start of 1946, the city's building inspector "stated today that home building in El Cerrito is bound to reach amazing figures during the coming year."[5]

Then there were the really big plans.

From the mid-1940s through the early 1960s, several schemes surfaced for major waterfront developments in areas served by Stege or potentially served by Stege. Offices, shopping centers and housing developments were proposed to be built on bay fill—despite the airplanes that would be buzzing in for a landing just overhead.

And by the early 1950s, plans were underway to create a mini-city in the oak-dotted hills and valleys of Wildcat Canyon just east of El Cerrito and Kensington. Portions of a parkway to serve that town were actually constructed—though the land itself became a regional park in the 1960s.

In 1946, Stege officials, facing their ever-present challenge of providing sufficient sewers for anticipated growth, predicted just how big that growth would be. By 1975, they determined, Stege Sanitary would be serving a population of 110,000.[6]

If that had happened, El Cerrito, which had taken to calling itself the "City of Homes" at least by 1939, would instead have become the "City of Highrises." Kensington, ensconced as it is on steep hillsides, would probably have remained a bucolic spot. The Annex and No Man's Land? They'd be filled with parking structures and hotels serving the airport.[7]

In fact, the population of Stege in 2013—as it celebrated its centenary—was 33,000, and was remaining fairly stable.

What blocked this growth was the democratic process. People in the Bay Area, tired of top-down control of land use and development by politicians working closely with developers, revolted, creating such pioneering groups as Save the Bay and, later, the Greenbelt Alliance, Citizens for East Shore Parks and a host of others to preserve shoreline public access and open space.

But during the heady days right after World War II, it wasn't Kay Kerr, Sylvia McLaughlin, and Esther Gulick, who formed Save the Bay in Kerr's El Cerrito hillside home, whom developers feared.

They thought something else could block plans for the projected development of the Bay Area—the lack of sewage facilities.

From its formation, Stege was in the business of laying sewer pipes just a step ahead of development.

It occasionally fell behind, as in 1923 when, lacking the funds, Stege couldn't put in sewers fast enough for developer C.W. Boden, who was filling "Cerrito Park" (today a neighborhood of stucco bungalows south of St. Jerome Catholic Church). Boden, stymied until the "sewer question is settled," decided to pay for the sewers himself.[8]

But the "sewer question" that arose after the war was quantitatively different—perhaps qualitatively too. It was, the Berkeley Daily Gazette wrote, "a million-dollar headache."[9]

The headache came to the Stege Sanitary District board in the form of a May 21, 1946 letter from the chief engineer of the California Bureau of Sanitary Engineering "advising that all permits for raw sewage disposal into the San Francisco Bay area would be revoked as of January 1, 1947."[10]

The population boom, plus the state mandate, meant Stege needed to spend $1 million or more, the Gazette reported, $800,000 for a treatment plant, $200,000 for new and improved sewer lines.

"Last year alone the district spent $400,000 in five sewer projects in the hills in north-east El Cerrito," reporter Tom Wheeler wrote.[11]

Without adequate sewers, development would halt.

Stege board members weren't sur-

prised, of course. They knew what the Bay looked like—and what it smelled like. "The Big Stench," some called it.

Stege, which built its first sewers in 1914, sent effluent from toilets, sinks and commercial enterprises directly into the Bay without any treatment. This was how every city and every sanitary district handled sewage at the time—and the Bay seemed big enough, the population small enough, that no one minded.

Andy Hansen, who was born circa 1906 and grew up on his family's pig farm on what is now Schmidt Lane in El Cerrito, recalled how large a role the bay played in the lives of boys during Stege's earliest days.

Andy and his friends would shoot ducks from blinds they built themselves. "Clams were available for the picking in the isolated areas," he told reporter Marilee Smeder.

"Their favorite sport in summer was skinny dipping," Smeder recounted, "for which they headed towards the bay. There was a muddy pond on the east side of the railroad tracks, and there was San Francisco Bay itself, where they swam with blissful disregard to the sewer outfall a block and a half away."[12]

Stege Sanitary District did make major improvements over the years to protect public health, as sewer outfalls were lengthened to dump effluent further from shore and in deeper water, and outfalls were raised, to prevent backflows during high tides.

It wasn't until the 1940s that serious thought was given to treating sewage before pouring it into the bay. The war helped bring the matter to people's attention.

Richmond and El Cerrito may have been boomtowns of a sort in the 1930s, the two fastest growing cities in the otherwise mostly agricultural Contra Costa County. But the war removed the qualifying "of a sort."

In Richmond, the Kaiser shipyards employed 100,000 people at their peak, turning out 747 ships during the war. Nearby, a former Ford auto plant was churning out tanks. To the other side of El Cerrito, a thoroughbred track was being used by the Navy to outfit landing craft. Richmond's wartime population zoomed from 23,000 to 100,000.

Suddenly, sewers became not just a local amenity, but a war priority.

"The health and welfare of the war workers employed in this vital industry is most important," an attorney for the federal government wrote, regarding a federally funded "war urgency" sewer project Stege was building in Richmond. "We consider it our duty to be conservative in providing proper sanitary sewage facilities to protect the health and welfare of war workers."

The goal of Stege's Meeker Avenue Interceptor was to take sewage to "the deep water of the Richmond Inner Harbor at minus 27 foot elevation where there is excellent dispersion and dilution."

The federal report cited serious health hazards caused by "contaminated solids, scums and rubbish" floating in the shipways of Kaiser's Permanente Metals Corporation Shipyard. "The men laying in the aft end of the keel and the scaffoldings work in these drifting deposits and contaminated water when the tide is high."

Inland residents were affected as well. "The waters of the launching basin … are undoubtedly polluted to some extent by the outfall, as are the drainage ditches which pass back into the town during high tide." The report described "sludge beds on the tidal flats, human excreta in the drainage ditches which pass less than 100 feet from inhabited buildings, floating solids in the shipways and sewage in the streets during stormy weather."[13]

By the start of 1945 it was clear, at least to C.C. Gillespie, chief of the Bureau of Sanitary Engineering for the state's Department of Public Health, that simply building longer and longer sewer outfall pipes was no longer good enough. The sewage would have to be treated.

Surveying the Albany-to-Richmond waterfront, Gillespie described the flow from Stege's Point Isabel outfall.

"Sewage is decidedly strong and it is a large stream." Currents were "evidently sufficiently strong to sweep clean the outer point of Point Isabel," he wrote. But "sewage solids swing strongly into" the shallow cove between Point Isabel and what is today Golden Gate Fields racetrack.

"A thick gravy-like sludge covering thousands of square feet is left by each tide and it is gradually filling the cove. Odors were not especially noticeable at the time, but it is unlikely that this will continue indefinitely."

"Looking to the future," the report continued, "there are strong signs that San Francisco Bay is coming on for a cleanup of sewage disposal conditions and the Stege outfall is bound to come in for complaints. To meet them in the current location, even in the absence of a change in waterfront

developments, would require sewage clarification and digestion with the drying of the sludge, supplemented by a longer outfall."

"If the much discussed transcontinental airport between Berkeley and Richmond should develop, this would immediately precipitate serious requirements on the Stege Sanitary District," the report went on.[14]

In 1947 a State Water Resources Control Board ruling, which essentially ordered Stege and sewer operators throughout the Bay Area to build treatment plants, presented the biggest challenge Stege had ever faced.

It was, moreover, a challenge that never seemed to go away as, over succeeding decades, state and federal agencies set increasingly strict mandates on water quality, prodded by public health advocates, fishermen increasingly anxious about the loss of their prey, the handful of thick-skin souls who still swam the bay, Save the Bay and other assorted environmentalists.

How Stege met that challenge, and continues to meet it is, in many ways, the story of the modern environmental movement.

Remarkably enough, for a minuscule district, Stege emerged as a leader in the fight to control pollution. Starting in the early 1980s Stege created a widely copied method of preventing stormwater from washing raw sewage through treatment plants before it could get treated. Stege pioneered the use of computers and geographical information systems to manage sewer maintenance and replacement.

Today, Stege is known throughout the industry as a sanitary agency whose board is quick and nimble, willing to try new things, with managers who are "real leadership types, out in front in terms of looking at the broader issues." [15]

The tale of Stege Sanitary District, "the little district that could," you might call it, also tells much of the tale of El Cerrito and its hinterlands.

Nothing that happened here escaped the attention of Stege. Stege people served as mayors and on the El Cerrito City Council. They served on committees overseeing affairs in unincorporated Kensington and on the Richmond Annex Neighborhood Council. They ran the area's garages, stores, and several of its raucous nightclubs and bars. Some worked for the El Cerrito Kennel Club, a greyhound racetrack, and some for the University of California, Berkeley.

Stege played a particularly large role in real estate development, of course, not only because for every residential tract opened, for every street laid, Stege had to be there pipes in hand. Stege did more than accommodate development, however. It promoted it, its formation guided by real estate investors and developers, and many of its members working in real estate or related fields.

Throughout El Cerrito and the surrounding area's building boom, which began shortly after World War I and lasted through the early 1960s, Stege hustled to annex more land to its district, lay sewer mains, increase their capacity, and ensure that homeowners and businesses connected to their mains, and did so properly.

The first local government in the area, Stege incorporated four years before El Cerrito incorporated in 1917—both incorporations spearheaded by some of the same people.

But there was a difference between the incorporations. At its founding, Stege encompassed more than 3,000 acres. At its founding, El Cerrito covered just about 2,300. (Both have expanded since.) By rights, backers of the new city thought, to create an entity that could be efficiently run and provided with services, the Stege borders should have become the borders of the city.

But they didn't, and people today still see that as an opportunity lost. Still, as events will show, it's likely that if Kensington and the Richmond Annex had become part of the city of El Cerrito, Stege Sanitary District would probably have been voted out of existence in the 1970s—if not much earlier.

Stege's history tracks both the development of the area and its social life.

The people who ran Stege, both elected officials and employees, mostly men but some significant women too, represented some of the area's best and brightest—and sometimes most colorful.

Among the earliest people of Stege are the man often regarded as El Cerrito's founder, William Rust, for whom part of the town was originally named; the man who probably named the city "El Cerrito," William Huber, a justice of the peace, judge, mayor, and owner of the gathering spot Huber Hall; and Ernest Navellier, laundryman, worker at a dynamite factory, city councilman, school trustee, owner of a picnicking and drinking establishment, and grandfather of a war hero.

CHAPTER 2

Stege Sanitary District is Older than the City

There wasn't much in El Cerrito when Stege Sanitary District got its start—not even the name "El Cerrito." The area north of the Alameda-Contra Costa county line developed more slowly than its neighbors to the south, Berkeley and Albany, and its neighbor to the north, Richmond, because it took so long to sort out who owned the land.

Before the matter was settled, only a handful of residents and businesses moved to town, most of them leasing land from, or serving as tenants to Victor Castro, whose Rancho San Pablo originally made up the entire area.

It was only in 1894, after the case Emeric vs. Alvarado was settled, that it was possible for buyers to secure clear title to land—finally allowing real development to proceed. It proceeded slowly.

County Line Streetcars 1906. At County Line, also known as Rust El Cerrito Historical Society

Louis Rodini and Ernest Rodini circa 1913 El Cerrito Historical Society, courtesy Arline Rodini

Fay Breneman, who founded the area's first library in 1913, the same year Stege was founded, described the area in that year. "When you got off the street car at the county line in 1913 you found a saloon on each side."

"Some other old buildings housed some lunch rooms on the east side. Blind Jim had a peanut and cigar stand there." [16]

She was describing the area at the city's southern border known as "Rust," named for William Rust, resident from the 1880s, a German immigrant and wagon-maker, whose hardware shop at county line served as the post office from 1909.

Rust's neighbor, John H. Davis, had arrived at County Line, as it was also called, a few years earlier and established what was probably El Cerrito's first business, after Castro's ranch that is—a tavern.[17]

"…after a big forge job," Rust's son later recalled, "(Rust) would call across the street to John Davis at the Seven Mile House and tell him to start drawing the steam beer for his helpers." Rust himself would not imbibe, being a teetotaler.

Two miles further north along Contra Costa Road (today, San Pablo Avenue), El Cerrito had a second commercial district, Stege Junction, where the Oakland Traction Co. streetcars swung left to head for the hamlet of Stege, in what is today Richmond. "At Stege Junction," Breneman wrote, "there were stores and a blacksmith shop. Mr. Moro had a plumbing shop there."

On the whole, El Cerrito was a quiet, rural redoubt, marshes, fields of grass and wildflowers, hills sparsely dotted with live oaks, bay trees alongside the creeks. Murietta Rock, named for the legendary bandit Joaquin Murietta, was a ridge top landmark visible for miles. In 1963 Roy Dahlen, who was a boy in 1913, "remembered when he could stand on San Pablo Avenue and look west to the bay and see nothing but rippling hay fields."[18]

Nearby Richmond was a working town, terminus for the Santa Fe Rail-

Muriel Talt smiles for the photographer from a donkey cart at the Talt family's "humble" abode, the old Castro Adobe, built in the 1840s by Victor Castro and later expanded. El Cerrito Historical Society, courtesy of the LaReau family.

road since 1899, home to the Standard Oil refinery since 1905, and the Pullman Company's railroad car repair shops since 1910, plus canneries and other industries.

The El Cerrito area was also home to two quarries, the Hutchinson, from 1903, and the Bates & Borland high in the hills, which sent its rock to the flatlands via rail.

"It was not uncommon for some of the cars to leave the hill in their downhill trek and the hillside was often littered with lost wheels, cables and rollers," Mervin Belfils, a longtime Stege employee and the city's unofficial historian, recounted in 1970. "In fact in August 1914, several gravel cars parked on the Stege spur up Moeser (Lane) broke loose and roared down the lane, jumped the track and piled up on the main line of Santa Fe railway. A youngster, Thurston Stark, heard the roar of the free-riding cars, dashed to the main line of Santa Fe and flagged down an approaching train."[19]

Also roaring along in the early Teens was residential development, which before had been restricted to a few small flatlands clusters of homes. "In 1912 the sale of lots in Richmond Annex was going merrily on," Fay Breneman wrote. The sales office for the E.J. Henderson Company, which was subdividing some 350 acres, was next to Rust's shop.

"The streets were well paved, trees were planted, and the parking strips were planted with petunias," she said.[20]

Development was also proceeding in the hills of Kensington, with several subdivisions including Berkeley Highlands, Berkeley Woods and Kensington Park.

As people moved onto the land they organized their own institutions. The closest real government, other than the local school and justice of the peace, was the county seat in Martinez, 25 miles away. Rust helped form a volunteer fire department in 1907, which lagged development—dangerously.

Breneman recalled a fire that broke out at a neighbor's at 1 a.m. on July 4, 1917—shortly after El Cerrito incorporated. Firefighter Winfred Schmidt pulled up late with the city's single fire engine. "He had found it with flat tires."

"Soon the Albany fire engine was on the spot and had the fire out."

In 1913, the largest public institution in town was the Mission-styled Fairmont School, built circa 1905. The town's foremost attraction was Sunset View Cemetery, which opened in 1908 just up the hill from the Seven Mile House in what is today Kensington. A way station greeted visitors at

The first office of the Stege Sanitary District was at Stege Junction at the corner of Portrero and San Pablo Avenues El Cerrito Historical Society

the streetcar stop, conveying them to the graveyard in a horse cart.

Clearly it was time to do something with sewage other than pour it into a cesspool or let it run in the gutter.

Forward-thinking folks knew that without sewers, homes couldn't be built and industry couldn't prosper.

"Great development ahead of the suburbs of Richmond," the Richmond Independent headlined in March 1913, noting that Richmond had just "sewered" its Pullman district.

"The Stege and County Line district people are up and doing," the article continued. "(They) will have an election shortly for the creation of a sanitary district for their rapidly developing territory."[21]

On May 14, hundreds of people gathered at the Alacosta Club near County Line for a "big mass meeting." After listening to backers of the proposed district, the crowd repaired to Davis Hall, "where they danced until a late hour" to the music of the Zahnizer orchestra.

Next morning they took to the polls to approve formation of the district and elect its officers. Eighteen men sought five seats on the Stege "commission," two sought to become the district's sanitary assessor. One man, A.H. MacKinnon, sought both a commission seat and the assessor's job.

"The voting was brisk throughout the entire day," the Independent reported, "as was shown by the fact that 226 ballots were cast out of a total registration of 285 voters."

Approval for creating Stege was overwhelming, 205 votes to eight.

The top vote getter for the commission, not surprisingly, was Stege's chief backer, William Huber, with 170 votes, followed by Henry Best,

Looking south along San Pablo Avenue from Blake. To the right are the streetcar tracks and then the Stege Market. The market is advertising, "Highest Prices paid for Beef Cattle, calves, and hides." El Cerrito Historical Society

"Direct streetcar service to Kensington Park." June 16, 1912 ad for a subdivision in what would later become the unincorporated community of Kensington, shows how development was getting underway in the area that a year later would be part of Stege Sanitary District.
Contra Costa County Historical Society

with 155, Constable H.F. Davis, with 138, Ernest Navellier, with 120, and George Barber, with 95.

MacKinnon came in near the bottom, with seven votes for commissioner—and 79 for assessor, trumped by George Scott, who was also serving as deputy county assessor.[22]

The board, meeting for the first time on May 28, 1913 at William Huber's "Justice Court, Rust, Cal.," named Huber their chairman, George Barber secretary. They set a tax rate of 15 cents per $100 of assessed valuation, the maximum allowed by state law. Each board member gallantly put up $5 for stationary and stamps.[23]

The organizers named the district Stege—after the place, it seems, and not after Richard Stege, one of the area's true characters, a German immigrant who'd been a hotelier and fur trader, among other occupations, before marrying a wealthy woman, coming into possession of her ranch alongside San Francisco Bay and turning it into showplace gardens, complete with frog ponds whose denizens he sold to French restaurants in San Francisco.

The area, today part of Richmond, quickly took on the name "Stege." Stege himself died in 1898, broke. The northern part of El Cerrito took on the name "Stege Junction" for its streetcar stop.[24]

First order of business? Raise funds to build sewers.

Working with the San Francisco law firm Reed, Black, Nusbaumer and Bingaman, and with the Oakland engineering firm Haviland, Dozier and Tibbits, Stege planned to raise $75,000 through a bond sale, the district's longtime manager Al Baxter wrote in a short history, "Stege Sanitary District is Older than the City."

"The purpose of the bond is the construction of a system of sewers and outfalls in and for Stege Sanitary District, consisting of main and lateral sewers and all rights-of-way, materials, accessories, appurtenances and appliances necessary for the construction and completion of said sewer system and outfalls."

The bond vote, which came before the populace in a special election on September 27, 1913, at Davis Hall, near Rust's shop on San Pablo Avenue at Fairmount Avenue, would both authorize the bond sale and "provide for the formation, government, and operation" of the sanitary district, under an 1891 state law providing for such formation. Approval was required from two-thirds of the voters.

The Oakland Tribune predicted passage, "as nearly everybody is in favor of the project and an active campaign has been carried on for several weeks on the subject." But backers weren't coasting. Huber, who "has been at work on the matter all week, day and night," spoke passionately in favor of the bonds the day before the vote, his sentiments echoed by Dr. Joseph Breneman, the area's first doctor and Fay's father, who spoke "from a

physician's point of view."[25]

It was a landslide, 202 for the bond sale, only nine opposed, with three ballots "illegally marked." It's not clear who opposed the bond sale or why.

"When the people of the Stege Sanitary District, in the southeastern part of Richmond, voted bonds for their new sewer system by 22-to-1," the San Francisco Call observed, "they showed that they were rather enthusiastic for improvements. This is a fast developing factory, railroad and harbor part of the city, and its growth has made a modern sewer system imperative."[26]

The creation and funding of Stege Sanitary District was a major step for the area, and it foretold a battle that would erupt four years later, the drive for El Cerrito's incorporation, which in a way can be seen as the dropping of the second shoe.

The borders of the sanitary district stretched from the county line on the south to Richmond's city limits on the north, and from the Bay on the west to the rugged hills of Rancho El Sobrante to the east.

Stege accepted bids for sewer construction on May 22, 1914, insisting that workers be paid the minimum wage, "$2.50 per day for each day's labor," and the work was soon underway.[27]

One main served Stege Junction, running towards the bay along Cypress Avenue. Another served Rust, running along Central Avenue. Both main lines carried untreated sewage to the Bay.

Over the next few years, as neighborhoods developed, Stege built a web of unglazed terra cotta sewer mains to serve them, hooking up with the lines that led to the Bay. The goal, Huber recounted some 40 years later, was to serve every house in the district—about 150 of them.[28]

Older sewer systems in the Bay Area generally handled both sewage and storm water, but from the start Stege operated, or tried to operate, a system that handled sewage only—though oftentimes property owners would illegally channel storm water into the sewers.

Soon, homeowners and businesses began connecting to Stege's sewers, paying for their own lateral connec-

Two years before Stege was incorporated to ease development of the area, Tom Pickle's farmhouse on Richmond Street was one of the few in what would become El Cerrito El Cerrito Historical Society.

tions.

The first sewer connection permit went to Mr. A. Renwitz on July 22, 1915. The sixth went to one of the city's signal businesses, the Seven Mile House, which by this time was owned by Huber.[29]

In the very early years, Stege would build a sewer to serve a single house. In 1915, Davis was named a "committee of one" to get bids for a sewer to the home of H. Eckman. In 1917, Stege provided a sewer to serve two nearby homes on Moeser Lane, providing 680 feet of six-inch pipe and two manholes.[30]

Stege also hired its first inspector, W.H. Best, who resigned from the Stege board in June 1914 to accept the job. This was the first of several instances of a Stege board member becoming an employee; when MacKinnon left the job two years later, he would be replaced by board member George Barber. The inspector's job paid $4 a day, notably higher than minimum wage. Later, Stege revamped its method of compensation, paying per inspection.[31]

"We had a sanitary inspector as the only employee," Huber recalled in the mid-1950s. "If we needed any maintenance on the main sewers or outfall lines it would be contracted out."

"And the sanitary inspector charged $1 for connecting to the sewer. That was his pay for the job; he'd pocket the money."[32]

To replace Best on the board, Stege turned to one of the area's most eminent businessmen, none other than William Rust.

As the only government around, Stege took on matters that went beyond sewage.

"Prior to March 13, 1914, the district board devoted much of its time to issuance of liquor licenses until

EC Library at Breneman House. Fay Breneman started El Cerrito's library in 1913 the year of Stege's founding. El Cerrito Historical Society.

questioned by the (county) board of supervisors as to the District's right in doing so. It also passed regulations prohibiting dogs from running loose without muzzles."[33]

Almost every meeting saw Stege issuing a liquor license or two, on October 24, 1913, for instance, awarding licenses to O. Ortiz at Lincoln and Liberty streets, and J. McClure, at Richmond and Fairmount.

A rabies outbreak in 1914 convinced the district to pass "an ordinance to guard against the spread of hydrophobia," calling for the shooting of dogs running at large.

In 1915 Stege shifted its meeting spot from Huber's office to an office in Rust's building over his hardware store—for a rent of $5 a month. Rust and Huber provided chairs and a filing cabinet.[34]

In 1915, Stege expanded its boundaries for the first time, taking in a portion of what later came to be called the Richmond Annex.

In 1916, after Best resigned, he was replaced by a man who would go on to play a leading role in civilizing the growing area, A.H. MacKinnon.

As El Cerrito marshal he led many a raid on gambling and drinking joints; when the jail opened in 1923 it was dubbed "Hotel MacKinnon." "Mac" later served as city sanitary inspector and as a judge, ran a realty office and built houses, and in 1925 opened the Fairmount Service Station, the city's largest and most modern.[35]

One of Mac's major tasks for Stege was keeping the lines flowing despite debris and other blockages. In mid 1915, Best declared the "flushing of sewers impracticable," and a year later the board decided that "automatic flushers (were) too expensive."

A deal was struck, first with Sunset View Cemetery, which irrigated its lawns using a pump house on San Pablo Avenue, then with the People's Water Company, which owned reservoirs in the hills, for "7 loads of water donated by the cemetery, 9,000 from People's Water Co at 30 cents per 1,000 gallons."

In November 1916, in connection with the water company deal, Stege reported its first, and one of its few, recorded instances of corruption, involving F. Dunlay, who had joined the Stege board earlier in the year.

"Huber addressed board. Dunlay had received money from L.C. Farrell of People's Water Co. Dunlay announced his resignation from the board. No action taken against People's Water Co."[36]

William Rust, one of the earliest settlers in the area, from the 1880s, later became a Stege board member. Starting in 1915, Stege ran its operations from an office above Rust's store. William Rust, Miss Alice McCarthy, and Rust's wife Lina. El Cerrito Historical Society, courtesy Louis L. Stein.

CHAPTER 3

If this election does not carry, we will try again and again

Some of the men who created Stege Sanitary District in 1913 worked four years later to create yet another local institution—a city. Backers included George Barber, Stege's first secretary, and William Huber, Stege's first president.

The goal was to supply the rolling hillsides and plains with not just sewers, but with streets, sidewalks, fire and police protection, everything needed for a growing residential community, all overseen by local people, not distant bureaucrats in Martinez.

The city would have the same borders as Stege. William Huber helped

Stege flushing and rodding trucks from the 1920s

come up with a name for the proposed city—and it wasn't "Rust." "The people did not like the name," he recounted, "because when it was mentioned it evoked remarks suggested by the word 'rust'."[37]

But it didn't prove as easy to found a city as it was to start a sewer district. The owners of Hutchinson quarry fought the plan, correctly foreseeing that as a city filled with residents, complaints would mount about the noise from blasting at rock. Dairymen were concerned that new neighbors would object to their cows.

Also opposed was an industry that had gotten its start the moment John H. Davis opened his Seven Mile House—the saloons.

Shortly before the August 1917 vote, one of the leaders of the incorporation effort, George W. Adams, heard that saloon owners and "brewery interests" planned to haul "a score of paid workers" to the polls to vote no. "We have not considered the saloon question one way or the other in this fight," Adams retorted. "We have been anxious to get fire protection and lights and other necessities and have had no quarrel with the saloons. But if they want trouble we will not back away from it. If this election does not carry, we will try again and again."

As it turns out, they did not have to try again and again. Incorporation passed by a tight vote of 158 to 131.

But incorporation only passed because backers of a city had agreed to drop areas where opposition was strong—including what is now known as Kensington and the Richmond Annex, and No Man's Land, a corner of territory west of San Pablo Avenue and south of the Richmond Annex that even then was known for gambling and vice.

The city proposed for approval by voters did not even straddle San Pablo Avenue. Portions of the western side would remain unincorporated until the 1920s—when they would be swallowed up, not by El Cerrito, but by Richmond. "Even Dr. Breneman," a strong backer of incorporation, "found himself outside the new city limits."[38]

Adams was on the first city council (called the Board of Trustees at the time). George Barber, a founder of Stege, was named city marshal. Also an original trustee was John Sandvick, who a year later would be elected to the Stege board, where he would serve for 28 years.

It took the new city government and Stege, the former de facto government, a bit of time to work out their new relationship. Much of the discussion had to do with how quickly Stege could provide sewers for new subdivisions and whether the city or Stege would enforce rules requiring homeowners to connect to the sewers.

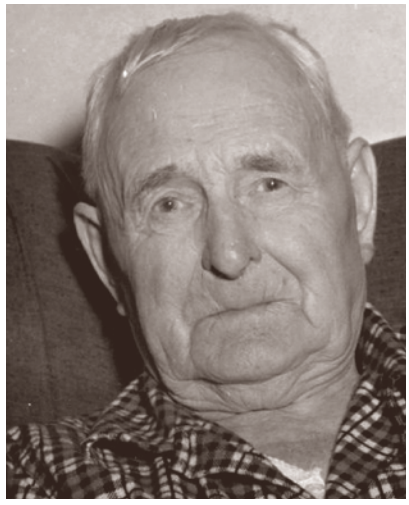
Stege, as the older sister, was always willing to help out the new city. When the city in mid-1919 asked voters to back bonds to build storm sewers, they borrowed Stege's voting booths.[39]

In early 1922, the El Cerrito Journal reported, the "question of jurisdiction which has been troubling both city trustees and the members of the Stege Sanitary Board for the past several months seems to be at last settling in a manner" satisfactory to all.

Stege would oversee sewers outside private property lines. On private property, the city would exercise its police powers "over health and sanitary conditions."[40]

A few months later, Stege was asking the city to stop demanding large deposits from contractors building sewers, as that was making it hard to find contractors. By 1925, Stege was holding its board meetings in City Hall. Instead of rent, Stege simply paid for the building's janitor.[41]

Archive photo of Richard Stege



John Sandvick served on the Stege Sanitary District Board of Directors for 28 years. Photo courtesy of his grandson, Richard Standvick

CHAPTER 4

The home city of the East Bay section

Folks motoring into town along San Pablo Avenue in early 1923 couldn't help but smile at a charming mural, spotlighted at night, showing "the building of their nest by little birds."

Atop the building sat "a large Magnavox" radio that broadcast radio concerts in the evening for young people.

"Going to Build?" a newspaper ad for the building's owners asked. "If con-

Bill Lotter milking a cow at Hinds Dairy. Ca 1920. El Cerrito Historical Society, photo courtesy Louis L. Stein

templating building a home or repairing your home, see Bigley & Walsh, contractors and builders. Mill and cabinet work of all kinds." Sharing the building was a plumbing firm and the electricians MacDonald and Rude, who supplied the Magnavox.[42]

Yes, by the early 1920s, the housing boom was on.

"El Cerrito, the home city of the East Bay section, invites home-seekers' attention to pertinent facts," an ad from the El Cerrito Land and Improvement Co. trumpeted on Christmas day 1922. "Lowest tax rate in the State. Lowest assessed valuation. Located near industrial centers. Streetcar and railroad service. Excellent schools and churches. Unexcelled climate and scenery."

Sewers were in, the developer bragged, water mains forthcoming, "cement walks laid, and beautiful Shade trees planted." Also, "a beautiful new School House has just been completed by the Trustees of the Ocean View School District" in nearby Albany.

"All of these improvements absolutely without cost to the lot buyers."[43]

El Cerrito was a city of high hopes and optimistic slogans. "A Bigger and Bigger El Cerrito" was the suggestion of the city's marshal. "He says that if everyone in El Cerrito will adopt the slogan and preach it to everyone, that El Cerrito will double in size within the next five years."[44]

"The beginning of a new era of prosperity in this section," the Journal wrote in 1923, as C.W. Boden began building 200 stucco cottages in Cerrito Park. A week after the Berkeley Fire destroyed 584 buildings and one of the prettiest neighborhoods anywhere, just over a mile south of El Cerrito, Boden was saying that "the great North Berkeley fire will promote development rather than retard it in this section."

"The growth of the East Bay section has got to be northward. There is no other direction for growth."[45]

A few blocks away, J.J. Moran was building 30 "cottages of which any city would be proud," while lobbying the Key Route system to run streetcars down what is now Ashbury Avenue.[46]

Elsewhere in town, Stege's former inspector, now city marshal, A.H. MacKinnon was planning 40 to 50 houses "for a nominal cost," of $2,750 and $2,950. "Easy terms will be the watchword so that every man of small income will be enabled to own his own home."[47]

Homes were also being built in the hillside tract called Berkeley Country Club Terrace, around Stockton and Terrace Avenues.

In El Cerrito, the Roaring Twenties really did roar. Prohibition banned booze, but the city was awash with "soft drink places" that won city permits to sell "soft drinks" but were often "not conducted in a manner which would be a credit to the city of El Cerrito."[48]

Nor were the drinks always so soft.

Enforcing the city's "new soft drink law" was none other than A.H. MacKinnon, who had his hands full with related matters.

"Chinese Lottery Joint Raided by Marshal MacKinnon," the Journal reported in 1923. Several lottery leaders escaped.

"The raid was carefully planned by Marshal MacKinnon and at the agreed time the two officers entered the place from opposite doors barring all chance of escape with the exception of the trap door which was not known of by the officers."[49]

And there was worse. "Hell Holes Along Avenue Must be Closed," the Journal urged, citing an undercover investigation recently completed by Mayor Phil Lee. "It showed that young girls of tender years are permitted to disgrace themselves, after being plied with liquor on the dance floor of at least one of these places."

The city developed such a bad reputation Lee felt repeatedly called upon to offer a defense. "El Cerrito has been pictured as the home of vice and the center of a hideous vice ring," he said.

"The fact is that El Cerrito is a city of average Americans—responsible, home-loving people, who work in the industries of the East Bay section."

It got so bad, the Journal reported, that "Conductors on the electric road between Oakland and Richmond displayed considerable brilliancy by designating the first stop (in El Cerrito) as 'Tia Juana' and the second stop as 'Grappo Junction'."[50]

But El Cerrito and hinterlands offered innocent pleasures as well. Huber Hall hosted weekly dances by the Pollyanna Girls and the Foresters Lodge, which also fielded its own baseball team.

In 1922 respectable El Cerritans founded the Community Service Club, "an organization which can give the city the proper kind of publicity," which in turn gave birth to the town's Boy Scout troop.[51]

And in the spring of 1923 the city

Maria Mayeda, daughter of one of the many Japanese nurserymen in the El Cerrito and Richmond area, stands in a field near her house on Wall Avenue. El Cerrito Historical Society, photo courtesy of the Maida family

saw its first regular showings of motion pictures. "Picture machine to be installed" at Fairmont school, the Journal reported, thanks to the PTA, which raised the funds through whist parties. Movies were soon being shown every week. A year and a half later, when the school burned down, a handful of cineastes cut through a wall to save the precious projector.[52]

By 1925, El Cerrito was maturing as a community, with a new library, that was promoted by the El Cerrito Improvement Association, and by a fire department upgrade and installation of hydrants, thanks to a bond issue that squeaked through on a vote of 231 to 104—only nine more votes than needed for the two-thirds requirement.

There were even clubs and restaurants that did not conceal roulette wheels in back rooms, or operate as speakeasies—at least not all the time—including Sullivans Café, known for its "famous chicken and squab dinners,"[53]

The El Cerrito Athletic Club, owned by Ed Wuelzer, who was elected to the Stege Board in 1924, featured prize-fighting and dancing to Armando Girola and his accordion jazz orchestra— and sometimes activities that warranted a visit from Marshal MacKinnon. Wuelzer would go on to run Paradise Gardens, a popular nightclub in the 1930s.[54]

El Cerrito also made its mark in the Twenties among fans of motorcycles and airplanes. Aviation pioneer Pierre Allinio built several aircraft that flew from airfields in Oakland and Richmond—and from one in El Cerrito just south of Harding School.

"The plane is about as perfect as planes are being made now, having a wingspread of 39.8 feet," the Journal reported of one, in 1923, adding that it was "painted in a Bellessa blue, which is Italian for very beautiful, and has gold trimmings."

Crowds ooh-ed and ah-ed over the plane when it was parked in Richmond. But the real crowds—50,000, according to the Journal—turned out for the annual Oakland Motorcycle Club "hill climbing contest" at the end of Blake Street, "over the top of the steepest hill in the East Bay section."

Not one to let an opportunity slip by, the city mounted a billboard at the race site. "El Cerrito," it proclaimed. "Watch us grow."

Stege was just one of the organizations seeing to that growth. The Fire Department, still volunteer, bought the latest in fire engines, an American La France. Trustees were pressuring the Post Office to establish a branch in El Cerrito, the Rust station having long since disappeared.[55]

The city's building inspector, A.I. Bigley, began cracking down on "shacks," and Mayor Phil Lee pushed for street lighting in the hills. City trustees, meanwhile, were worried that "Kensington Park may annex to city of Berkeley soon." This was part of the Stege district, and an area El Cerrito desperately wanted within its own borders.[56]

The question of annexing nearby territory to the city of El Cerrito—No Man's Land, the Richmond Annex, the various neighborhoods that would soon make up Kensington, repeatedly arose throughout the Twenties and Thirties—with El Cerrito at one point threatened by annexation itself.

"Richmond would annex us," the headline ran. The proposal from the Richmond Chamber of Commerce never went anywhere.[57]

Richmond tried to annex the "Annex" and No Man's Land in 1925 but voters said no. El Cerrito tried a year later. Again no. Richmond succeeded in annexing the Annex just a few years later—but El Cerrito would have no such luck with No Man's Land until decades later.

During this period, Stege Sanitary kept expanding its service area, creating assessment districts to raise funds in Kensington as housing developers subdivided the land.

Throughout the 1920s, Stege hustled to build sewers to accommodate residential growth, sometimes falling behind due to lack of funds. J.J. Moran, who was building bungalows near Cerrito Park, complained that "populating this tract will be practically impossible unless sewers are installed."[58]

Building sewers and other public improvements was a bit of a chicken-or-the-egg-game. A neighborhood couldn't develop until it had sewers and streets, but sewers and streets couldn't be built before the neighborhood developed because they were funded by assessments on property in the neighborhood.

At one point, the Stege board ruled, the "extension program" to serve Kensington Park "will have to be somewhat curtailed for a short time on account of the shortage of funds."

The developer Boden explored tying his Cerrito Park tract into Albany sewers rather than waiting for Stege—but Albany wouldn't have him. "Sewer question is troubling

Boden," the Journal observed, forcing a construction halt until the "sewer question is settled."

Stege finally sewered the tract, connecting to a temporary septic tank until funds could be obtained to connect to the district's main lines. Later in the year, Stege and the city agreed to jointly fund sewers for Boden's Cerrito Park and for Kensington Park, the city raising its funds through assessments on property owners.[59]

And, though they were working towards the same end, the city and Stege didn't always cooperate. Stege said it was easier to put in sewers outside of the city limits than within, because within they needed to reach agreement with the city's engineer.[60]

It also wasn't enough to build sewers. Homeowners had to tie into them by putting in their own laterals. Many did not, using "privies" instead. This was a job for both the city and Stege.

"Sewers must be connected with mains at once," city trustees ordered in 1922, or property owners would face arrest. "Many complaints have been made to the board by residents of various sections of the city of the stench arising from cesspools."

"The health of the city is in danger."

The Journal chimed in: "There are property owners in every community, and El Cerrito is not without them, who would be willing to sacrifice the health of the entire community rather than spend a few dollars."

It wasn't always easy to acquire right of ways for sewer lines. Stege could force property owners to provide right of ways outside the city—but not within city limits. Inside city limits, acquiring right of ways required action by both Stege and the city.

There also were neighborhoods that didn't want sewers at all—not if they had to pay assessments for them.[61]

Sewer lines weren't the only bit of infrastructure going in during the bustling Twenties. Sidewalks and streets were being paved, as the city entered what the Journal called its "street improvement era." The city was also building storm sewers and the privately owned East Bay Water Company was laying water mains.

El Cerrito begged East Bay Water to lay its mains, and Stege to lay its sewers, in advance of street paving, to avoid having to rip up brand new streets later. Unpaved streets and dangerous walks to school on dirt paths had neighbors up in arms. But neighbors could also get "extremely indignant" about high assessments for such improvements.[62]

John Grondona standing in front of his store, Farmers Produce Market in 1925. El Cerrito Historical Society

CHAPTER 5

The chicken business is rapidly growing

By the mid 1940s, El Cerrito had adopted what remains its semioffi-cial nickname, the "City of Homes." This came about through gradual evolution. Back in 1922, a certain Mr. Schaefer had proposed another boosterish moniker, "The Gateway to Contra Costa."

"Not a bad title, is it?" the El Cerrito Journal wrote.

"But let's make it a real gateway," the Journal went on, "one that we will not be ashamed to have company come through. One that we can point to with pride. Clean up your yard leading from the gate to the backyard. How about a few flowers along the way? Other cities have planted California poppies in their vacant lots, why not El Cerrito?"

Later that year, as we have seen, city boosters were calling it "the home city of the East Bay section." By 1939, Chamber of Commerce ads were focusing on its hills and its views, dubbing the town "Panoramic City."

But a year later, the Journal was dropping views for homes, in an editorial that celebrated the lowering of commuter charges to San Francisco from 60

Telephone poles lie uprooted after a rain and wind storm in 1927. The view is on San Pablo near Fairmount Avenue looking towards Albany.
El Cerrito Historical Society, photo courtesy Louis L. Stein.

cents a day to 27 cents. Now it would be cheap as well as easy to live in El Cerrito while working in the city.

"The momentum of our PROGRESS continues! Watch El Cerrito, the CITY OF HOMES, continue to grow."[63]

City of Homes! Nice sound! But it might not have turned out that way, not if the chicken farmers, dairymen, and quarrymen had had their way.

From the early days, El Cerrito's handful of straggling homes had contended with neighboring uses that weren't always neighborly, from the powder works that blew up a portion of Albany Hill at the start of the 20th century to the Hutchinson and Bates & Borland quarries.

Dairies had long operated in town, and flower growers, many of Japanese or Italian descent, filled a swath of the northern end of town with greenhouses.

In 1922, city boosters were proud their town had been chosen by the Great Western Power Co. as the site for its "Great Western Sub-station," which was "to be one of the largest in the world."

"El Cerrito is lucky to land this station," the Journal wrote. "While the number of men employed after the completion of the station will be small, the advertisement of having one of the largest sub-stations in the state is worthwhile."[64]

The power station, which remains a landmark today as the PG&E substation on Schmidt Lane, was quiet. Not so some of the city's existing industries. Hutchinson Quarry, which was much closer to homes than its uphill neighbor, Bates & Borland, frequently came in for criticism.

In 1925, after people reported windows breaking from post-midnight blasting, the city intervened, cutting back on night hours. Among the complainants was Harry Kalis, the city's "poundman." Stege too issued its complaints, as Hutchinson rock trucks crushed the district's manhole covers, leading to "great danger of open manholes."[65]

To make matters worse, a third quarry was planned for the northern end of town, one that was just being settled as the Berkeley Country Club Tract, an upscale development near the new Berkeley Country Club (today, Mira Vista Golf and Country Club). New homeowners presented city trustees with a petition, and the city fought back.

"Law aimed at quarry passes first reading," the Journal reported in May 1923. The Trustees ruled the land should remain residential. MacKinnon delivered word to the quarry owners—who refused to stop excavating. The El Cerrito Quarry Company said the ordinance had no effect since the city passed it after work had started. They promised to improve the area after quarrying, and said the material they were removing from the hillside, the "best grade rock to be found in this section of the state," was needed.

The battle went on for more than a year, with several quarry workers being arrested for violating the city's stop-work order, before the quarry ceased operations.[66]

The city's battle against livestock took several decades longer to resolve.

"Andy Shevlin in Chicken Business," the Journal reported in 1922. This "well known Stockton Street resident … has decided to cast his lot in the chicken business," with the recent purchase of 500 chicks.

A month later the paper reported that "Brensel and Navellier have purchased 3,000 baby chicks with which they intend stocking their poultry ranch and Mr. Kayser of Potrero Street has also purchased 3,000 for his chicken ranch. There are many residents of the Stege section planning on entering the chicken business and erelong El Cerrito will be a little Petaluma."[67]

Within a year, though, chickens were proving too much of a good thing. Both Stege and city officials grew concerned about the impact of poultry and other livestock on public health—as did neighbors.

"The stench arising (from dairies) is unbearable," residents complained, "and … the unsightly condition of the lots where the cows are kept prevented the sale of many home lots in the vicinity." And in the northern part of town, goats were "the nightmare of residents."

City trustees proposed an ordinance that would ban diaries and goat raising in town, and another insisting on sanitary conditions.

They finally passed a plan restricting families to two cows or two goats. To have a larger herd required an acre for each additional animal. And no bulls were allowed, unless within a barn.

The city also focused on chickens. One trustee proposed an ordinance to "cover every kind of a chicken, and every act that a chicken is capable of." He urged that owners keep their chickens penned, saying no one could plant a garden without chickens immediately pecking it apart.[68]

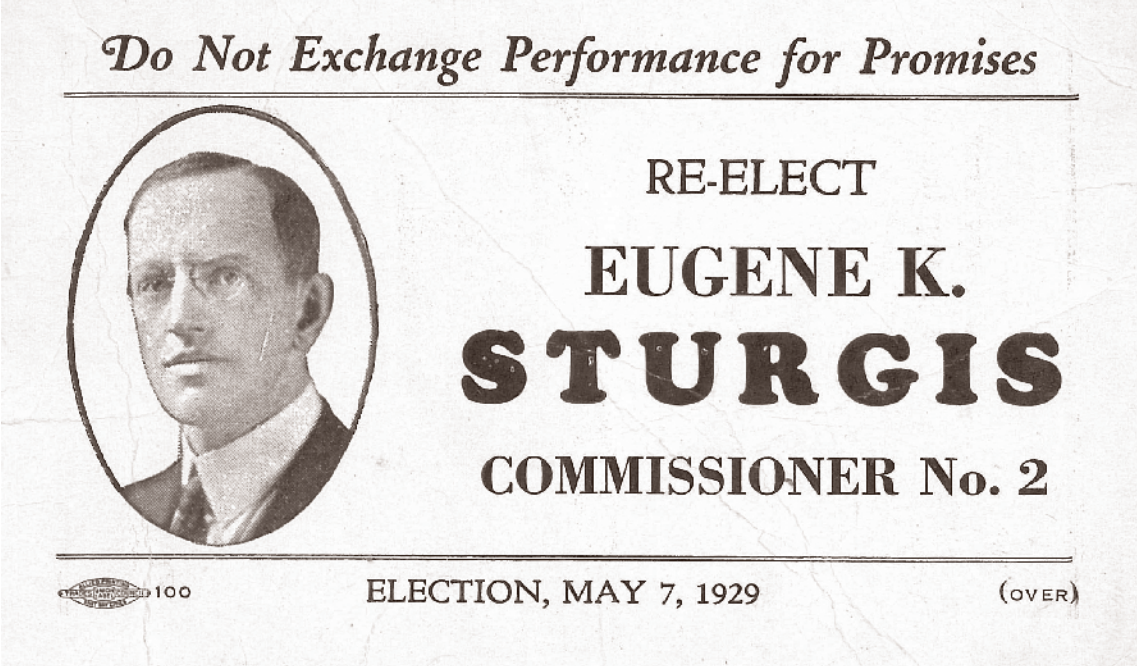
CHAPTER 6

Efficiency and economy candidates are receiving offers of support everywhere

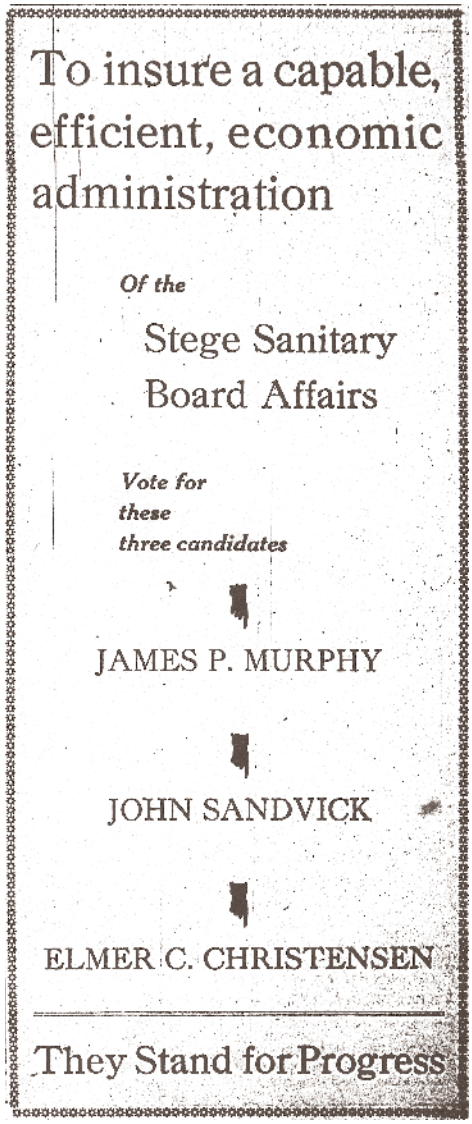
Throughout its history Stege has been a bit of a mystery to most people, overseen and often run by people well known in the community, but the district itself rarely attracting much attention. Few of its public meetings have attracted the public, and many elections have failed to attract challengers.

Not so, however, a pair of elections in the mid 1920s—though exactly what attracted a relative horde of candidates remains hard to fathom today.

By this time, Stege wasn't even awarding "soft drink" permits, which might have generated a bit of cash under the table. The city's trustees and county supervisors were now in charge of such permits.



Eugene Sturgis, for many years Stege's attorney, also served as elected commissioner for the City of Oakland.



The 1925 Stege election featured a three-man slate. Christensen and Sandvick, who were elected, went on to serve the district for decades.

"Much interest being shown in Stege Sanitary Board election on March 11," the Journal reported in February 1924. "… much talk is to be heard concerning the various candidates."

Charles H. Schwake, a local plumber, and W.F. (Tom) Talmadge were running for the board on a "platform of efficiency and economy." Ernest "Babe" Brensel, long associated with Stege Lumber Co. and "well equipped with business ability," was running on the ticket for sanitary assessor, an elected position at the time.

"Contrary to the belief of many, there are other things to be done by a Sanitary Board aside from the mere installation of sewers and their maintenance," the Journal explained, "and these three men are pledged to look after the interests of the District in all matters pertaining to the deeds of the District in reference to clean and sanitary conditions within the district as well as the maintenance of healthy and sanitary conditions of the streets and thoroughfares."

Also in the race was Edward Wuelzer, president of one of the city's volunteer fire departments, with "a large following in northern section where he lives," H. Van Fleet, and Mrs. George C. Carrick. Mrs. Carrick's husband, who had served on the Stege board for two years, had just resigned to take the job of sanitary inspector.

But it was Schwake-Talmadge-Brensel ticket that garnered most of the paper's attention. "Efficiency and Economy candidates are receiving offers of support everywhere," it reported.

Election day lived up to expectations.

". . .the voting continued steady all day until the last hour when voters stood in line waiting their turn to cast their ballot. There was considerable excitement all day and many workers were out early working hard for their favorite candidates.

"Many automobiles were scouting for voters all during the day and if any voter walked to the polls it was his or her own fault as there were enough machines to carry all to the voting places."

In "the most spirited election ever held by the Stege Sanitary District Board," the victors were Schwake, Brensel, as sanitary assessor, and Wuelzer, who "nosed Talmadge out by 11 votes."

"In justice to Mrs. George Carrick, who received a nice complimentary vote, it should be mentioned that she asked her friends throughout the district to disregard her name on the ballot, as she was not desirous of being elected."

Compared to the '24 race the '25 was a snoozer—though it did attract six candidates for five spots, with only one incumbent seeking re-election.

"Some lively politics has developed over the past week," the Journal reported, with the candidates divided into two opposing slates.

The winners were John Sandvick, who would go on to serve 28 years on the board, Elmer Christensen, a Richmond Annex resident who worked for Standard Oil who would serve on the board till 1948, when he died in office, and Clifford Hinds.

"The defeated candidates as well as the sucessful ones are satisfied that a clean campaign was made and none have any ill feeling over the result," the Journal concluded.[69]

CHAPTER 7

A 1934 program for the El Cerrito Kennel Club, which had 11 races daily.
Richard Schwartz EC Historical Society

Speed! Action! Sparkle! Eleven races every night except Sunday

Shortly after its formation, in a burst of activity, Stege directors issued six resolutions pertaining to the bond election and sewer construction.

By 1929, resolutions were appearing almost regularly, most dealing with important but mundane matters, agreements with the bank, the Berkeley Water Front Co., a request from Albany to connect with Stege pipes, and setting pay scales.

Then, in October 1932, came Resolution 27, one that would turn a raucous town filled with speakeasies and gambling dens into… well, a town that had gone to the dogs.

"Resolution to grant permission to Albany to allow Wembly Amusement Corp. to connect their sewer system to Albany and in effect Stege Sanitary" made it possible for John Jerome, "the kind of man who is either liked or detested by those he comes in contact with," called "Jack" by his friends and "Black Jack" by others, to open his El Cerrito Kennel Club.[70]

The racetrack, on the site of today's El Cerrito Plaza, featured "greyhound racing under the option system," meaning that a bettor—no, don't call him a "bettor," as betting on dogs was illegal—bought an option to buy a dog before the race, then sold the option for a profit if the dog won.

And win they did, some of them, dogs like Flying Warrior, Rough Mac, Tara Hill, Dangerous Dan, Susie the Warrior, Laddie Footsteps. A good bet was Blue Rabbit, the classiest dog at hurdles, according to Kennel Club Notes, a weekly column in the El Cerrito Journal. "Blue Rabbit takes the jumps so cleanly that fans are amazed at his skill."

"You get two looks at the El Cerrito dogs before each race, under the new system in effect at this popular track," the Journal reported.

"First the greyhounds stand on the indoor platform, close to the option booths. After being given a good inspection by the fans there, the dogs parade on the track and then fall into review again before the starting box. On the track the dogs line up parallel with the grandstand, and facing the crowd, being but a few feet away from the railbirds. By this method a fan has a good

The grandstand and track at the El Cerrito Kennel Club. This picture is believed to have been taken before the track opened to the public. Harding School can be seen near the center of the photo and the Sunset View Cemetery and the Sunset Mausoleum building are directly above it.
El Cerrito Historical Society

chance to size up the alertness of his dog or to make up his mind which is his choice."

And the Kennel Club offered more than dogs. "Gorgeous girls will parade in Bathing Beauty revue tonight," one ad read. New cars were awarded in prizes. Neighbors brought their house pets by for mutt races. And there was more.

"Talk about real fun! The ostrich race, with Negro boy jockeys, as staged Tuesday night, is one of the best bits of entertainment of the season," the Journal reported.

"These boys did their derndest to ride like real jockeys, but staying on a bouncing ostrich is something of a task and the comical tumbles these boys took during the race last night produced a barrel of fun. And when the policemen fired blank cartridges you should have seen the ostriches fly. They literally flew along the track, with the jockeys hanging on and whooping."[71]

City policemen worked at the track during their off hours, as did Mayor Phil Lee. Many Cerritans took to raising dogs in their homes, and it was estimated that 700 greyhounds called El Cerrito home. Many toured to other dog tracks in the Bay Area and nationwide.

For those who didn't care for dogs, El Cerrito and No Man's Land offered dozens of other venues for fun.

Gambler Big Bill Pechart's Rancho San Pablo, Castro's former adobe, was next to the track, and his Wagon Wheel within shouting distance. At the Southern Club, Sexy Sax led "one of the best known groups of colored entertainers in the region." Folks flocked to the Hollywood Inn, "where bohemian life blazes in an atmosphere of chivalry."[72]

Still, when the Kennel Club shut for the season, as it did several months every year, El Cerrito quieted down considerably.

Besides any moral turpitude the Kennel Club brought to town—and District Attorney Francis Healey, who raided the track on occasion, repeatedly accused city officials of ignoring "morals laws"—the track brought more down-to-earth problems, including a citywide outbreak of fleas.[73]

El Cerrito's defenders included Mayor Hans Nissen. "Why anyone can feel El Cerrito is a sink of iniquity is a mystery to me," he said. "El Cerrito is a law abiding community."

"The dog track can be called a nuisance," one neighborhood opponent argued, "because barking dogs and the loudspeaker system disturbs the residents, it breeds rats and fleas, it is a fire hazard, and it attracts an undesirable element."

Earl Warren, known today for his role as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and before that as California attorney general and governor, gets much of the credit for shutting down the track, along with many other gambling joints in and around El Cerrito. But really it's the neighbors who deserve much of the credit.

By the mid 1930s, several neighborhood associations were fighting the track, not surprisingly, mostly those that abutted it.

"I am interested chiefly in El Cerrito as a home city," Frank Aiman told the Cerrito Park Improvement Club. "I have no desire to have this city known as the gambling center of Northern California." The dog track, he said, "diminishes the desirability of El Cerrito is the eyes of homeowners."

Aiman, formerly a seller of "options" at the track, said he was "familiar with its operations and management. I find nothing to commend in either."

"Contrary to what you are asked to believe, only a small portion of the salaries and wages at the dog track go to local residents. Only a few local people are employed in any but the lowest paid jobs, option sellers in particular being paid less than at any track within my knowledge..."

"Kennel Club will close this Friday," the Journal announced on March 16, 1939—and not just, as usual, for the season. Jerome made the decision after "receipt of formal notice from Attorney General Earl Warren that he believes dog racing as practiced in California is illegal and that he plans to take action to close the seven tracks in the state."

"I have always believed operation to be legal," Jerome said. "If, however, the attorney general says it is illegal, I am not disposed to disagree with his opinion."[74]

CHAPTER 8

A very grave menace to public health

By the mid- to late-1930s, Depression or no, El Cerrito had again become a residential boom town.

"It is generally assumed that the East Bay will experience a building boom with the completion of the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge," the El Cerrito Journal wrote in 1934, urging Cerritans, "Let's not get caught napping."[75]

Stege was not napping. The district had re-organized in 1923, under that year's state Sanitary District Act. In 1929, with some of its sewers already 15 years old, it began a program to rebuild and improve its system.

The $75,000 in bonds, sold in 1914 to finance the original system, still had $15,000 due, and would mature in 1934.

According to a 1929 report from Stege engineer Ross Calfee, population growth in the sanitary district—it doubled in a decade, plus began serving 300 acres in Albany—required that major improvements be made.

He warned that the current southerly outfall into the bay had become obstructed as the bay silted up. When built in 1914, both north and south outfalls were "1.4 feet above ordinary low tide," Calfee wrote.

"The outlets had no obstructions and sewerage had free flow," he wrote. But now, because of "westerly winds and tide action… silt, sand and debris… has completely covered the existing pipe to a depth of about one foot. In other words, in the last 16 years, the tidelands have filled in over four feet."

In a report a year later, Calfee described what happened at Albany's northern sewage outfall, which entered a slough north of Albany Hill, just south of the county line.

"Discharging into a very small and narrow slough, it is impossible for diffusion and dilution of the sewage to properly take place under these conditions."

"Through the action of the ebb tide, part of the sewage is carried out into the shallow water over the mud flats. There being no current here, again through the action of the flood tide and the prevailing westerly winds it is carried back in again and deposited on the shores and mud flats in the immediate vicinity east of the Southern Pacific Railroad, thus creating a very obnoxious odor and resulting in a very grave menace to public health."[76]

By the mid 1930s, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the bay was in danger, as were the people who used it.

"Cerrito shore clams barred," the Journal reported in 1934. The state Board

of Health ruled that this and other areas were "grossly polluted and the consumption of clams taken there highly dangerous."[77]

Calfee's proposed solution, seconded by the chief of the state Department of Public Health, was to abandon both the original north and south Stege outfalls, replacing them with a new line that "carries the sewerage out farther into the Bay and to a place where sanitary conditions are more favorable."

For Albany he proposed abandoning the outfall and connecting Albany's mains with a 36-inch Stege interceptor line. Pile and timber foundations would be built in the swamp to support the new lines.

In early 1930, the state Board of Health granted Stege a permit to extend its outfall line onto a wooded knoll, Point Isabel, named in the mid-1800s for Victor Castro's daughter. From this moment on, until the early 1970s, when sewage treatment was taken over by a regional agency and shifted to a plant in Oakland, Point Isabel would be central to Stege's operations.

The next step for Stege was financing the project, made complicated because the district, which totaled 3,300 acres, covered three political jurisdictions, El Cerrito, 2,320 acres, Richmond, 320 acres, and unincorporated territory, No Man's Land and Kensington, 660 acres. Stege was also serving a small portion of Albany, under contract to the city, but Albany couldn't become part of the district because, under the 1923 sanitary district law, districts could not serve towns in different counties.

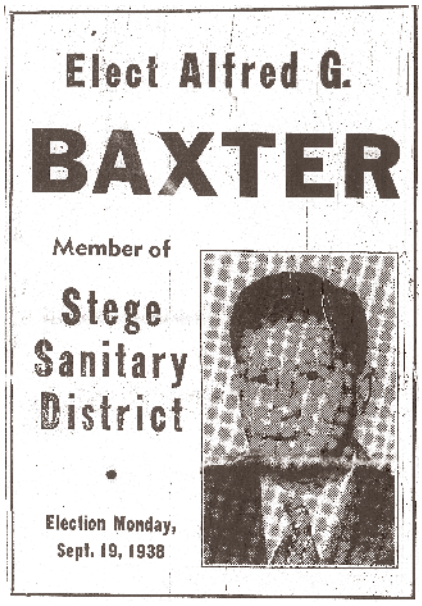
Funding was provided through an assessment, which required voter approval.

Already by the start of the 1930s Stege knew that eventually it would be required to treat its effluent before releasing it.

When designed in 1930, the district later wrote, "provision was made for future construction of primary treatment plant when and if required, near Point Isabel."[78]

Looking east from Albany Hill up Brighton Avenue in Albany. Cerrito Creek comes down from the hills to the left of Brighton. The original building at Sunset View Cemetery is at the top of Fairmount Avenue and the buildings of John Balra's dairy are north of the cemetery.
El Cerrito Historical Society

CHAPTER 9



Al Baxter first won election to the Stege Board in 1938—and remained with the district the rest of his life.

El Cerrito storm damages are heaviest in history

By the mid 1930s, small housing tracts were sprouting throughout El Cerrito and the Richmond Annex. The San Pablo Land Co. was hard at work in the Annex, and A.H. Hammarberg was planning a subdivision near the brand new El Cerrito High.

"Few people realize that, in point of population, El Cerrito is the second city in Contra Costa County, exceeded only by Richmond."

The city's population was 5,500 in 1938, when it was the fastest growing city in the county, with 166 homes built that year, an all-time high. And it just got better. By March 1939, the Journal estimated that a house a day was being built. The pace evidently slackened as the year went on; the total for 1939 came to only 240.[79]

Stege was growing along with the city and its hinterlands. Mason McDuffie, the Berkeley realty and development firm run by the Sierra hiker Duncan McDuffie, planned one of its boldest moves yet—a quasi-suburban neighborhood in what was then a wilderness, a windy unincorporated ridge in Kensington overlooking Wildcat Canyon.

The area had no services at all. McDuffie needed 30,000 linear feet of sewer lines for a cost of about $40,000. Stege expanded its boundaries to accommodate the subdivision.

By mid 1939, Stege was hustling to put in $16,000 worth of new sewers for several other hillside tracts, Mira Vista (the former Berkeley Country Club tract), Arlington Estates and Richmond Junction Heights. Homes in Arlington Estates were still using septic tanks.

It proved something of a rush to get the streets, sidewalks, sewers and storm drains in place quickly enough to meet the demand for houses. The City Council, which was handling the assessments to fund the work, authorized the city engineer "to secure the services of any man for the job to secure the plans at the earliest possible date."

Federal job creation funds were helping, with the WPA (Works Progress Administration) spending $161,190 on Mira Vista streets.

Depression-era alphabet soup programs were helping Stege in other ways too, with the federal Civil Works Administration paying for Stege to clean debris from Cerrito Creek to prevent flooding in No Man's Land.

The rapid development in the hills was putting pressure on Stege's sewers, as grading and paving increased the flow of storm water, which flooded into Stege's lines. Manholes began popping. Stege urged the city council to speed up construction of storm sewers to handle the flow.

Stege also put in sewers for the Gill Tract, west of San Pablo Avenue and south of Cutting, where an automobile trailer camp won approval to use a septic system until sewers could be built.[80]

Stege and city staffers were working very closely by the late 1930s, in part no doubt because they'd been sharing a building since late 1937. Stege had taken over a desk in city hall, with Lillian Chase serving as Stege assessor and office clerk. Gone were the days of running the district from the home of the chairman of the board.[81]

A landmark event for Stege occurred in 1938, when a young man who sold truck engines at Hall-Scott Motors in Berkeley was first elected to the sanitary board. It was an unusually large turnout for a Stege election, 1,012 voters, almost double the vote in any previous year. Alfred G. Baxter, known to all as Al, came in second, with 496 votes.[82]

Baxter, Denver born but El Cerrito bred, made his mark quickly, in 1939 becoming chairman. He held leadership positions on the board off and on until 1957, when he quit to become the district's manager, serving in that role to 1984. Baxter stayed with Stege a total of 47 years. No one, not even the founder William Huber, would play a larger role in Stege's history than Al Baxter.

Throughout the 1930s, Stege was issuing slews of resolutions and an occasional regulation, which suggest the range of activities that was keeping the district busy.

In 1934, a resolution granted exclusive rights to pick up garbage in the area to Oakland Scavenger Co., and in 1935, a regulation required homeowners to place their garbage in cans, not in alleys or ditches, and "placed so as not to be upset by dogs or unauthorized scavengers."

The regulation also banned anyone from keeping "upon his premises in an unsanitary condition or improperly ventilated, any barn, stable or huts for dogs." Floors in barns were required to have gutters and be connected to Stege's sewers.[83]

Resolution 41 was a "resolution of protest" against "keeping of animals in excess of family need in the Richmond Annex area."

The Annex and No Man's Land had long been plagued by unsanitary conditions. Besides a slaughter house, which Stege began serving in 1919, empty lots throughout the area were used as informal dumps. Later, Stege gave the city of El Cerrito permission to create a dump for household waste.

By the mid-1920s, residents of the low-lying neighborhoods were up in arms about both the illegal dumping and El Cerrito's official dump—which had been placed, conveniently enough for the city, outside of its borders.

The Annex Improvement Club complained that the official dump was so poorly marked, folks just dumped anywhere. George Carrick, a former Stege board member who was now the district's sanitary inspector, staked out the border of the official dump, hoping that would solve the problem. It did not.

It's rare that Stege and the city ever came to blows, but they did in mid-1925 when Stege, responding to a petition from the Annex Improvement Club to close the city dump, declared it a public nuisance.

"The condemning of the garbage dump in the Annex brings a situation whereby Annex residents and El Cerrito residents now have no place to dump their garbage, and they will be in violation of the law unless some remedy is found immediately," city trustees announced.

The stalemate continued for several months until the city worked out a deal with a Richmond hauler to take the trash.

Garbage, alas, proved to be a problem that lasted for years. The city later established dumps for household trash at Gladys and Norvell, at today's Castro Park and, at the Hutchinson Quarry, after the quarry shut following World War II.[84]

Another perennial problem that came to the fore in the 1930s was flooding. While floods could occur at several places in town, in the hills, along rushing creeks, in commercial districts, by far the deepest problems arose in the lowest lying portions of the district, including portions of the Richmond Annex and No Man's Land.

Epicenter for the floods that sent stormwater through basements and the first floors of some homes, and that caused manholes to pop and spew raw sewage, was the corner of Central and Belmont Avenues.

Only seven feet and a few inches above sea level, the corner, the lowest

street elevation in the Stege district, was only three feet above the average highest tide of the year and less than one foot above the 100-year storm tide.

As the area developed, small houses were built on land that regularly turned into marsh during winter storms. Meanwhile, development further inland caused increased runoff, making matters worse. Cerrito Creek and its tributaries, increasingly hemmed in, had less room to wander. When the creek filled, water had no place to go but into the streets and into Stege's sewers.

"El Cerrito storm damages are heaviest in history," the Journal reported in February 1939. Flooding hit areas well east of San Pablo Avenue as well as the Annex and No Man's Land. Homes and businesses flooded in the heart of the commercial strip, San Pablo and Fairmount avenues, and a garage further uphill on Pomona Street collapsed.

Stormwater got into the sewers, overwhelming capacity and causing them to overflow, sending sewage mixed with rainwater into people's homes.

When the flooding repeated itself a year later, only worse, with floods on the Arlington, along Poinsett Creek on Rosalind Avenue, and again on Pomona, residents flooded City Council meetings.

A "city wide mass meeting" was held at Harding School, attracting 70 people and a "flood survey committee" formed. City attorney Homer Patterson put part of the blame on developers for diverting creeks, building on top of them, and failing to culvert their waters. The council prepared an ordinance.[85]

Flooding and associated sewage overflows would plague the city for years to come.

Red Cross volunteers played an important role during World War II. El Cerrito Historical Society

CHAPTER 10

Sand is the best method of combating incendiary bombs

Movies kept playing at the Cerrito Theater, which opened on Christmas 1937, and the city's dinner houses and nightclubs stayed in business—but people turned out their lights at night and drew their curtains tight for fear of Japanese bombing raids.

The attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into the Second World War terrified people. "Sand is now available at twenty-two points in Richmond," the Independent announced at the start of 1942. "Sand is the best method of combating incendiary bombs," the fire chief said.

A month later a 19-year-old El Cerrito lad, the American-born John Hideo Ura, who both worked and lived at the city's Adachi nursery, was arrested by the FBI, whose agents thought his ownership of guns, and his driving without headlights through the nearby town of Lafayette, suggested he was a fifth columnist.

That same month, an Italian national who had long run a locksmith shop in downtown Richmond ended his life by walking in front of a train, in despair at the recent federal order requiring German, Italian and Japanese aliens to vacate the coast.[86]

And in May 1942, one of the largest industries in West Contra Costa was decimated when Americans of Japanese descent were rounded up and sent to desert internment camps. Many owned nurseries and retail flower shops in northern El Cerrito and Richmond, including Hikojiro and Tomi Mabuchi and their three American-born daughters.[87]

What had been El Cerrito's dog racing track was now the federally-funded Fair Mount Trailer Park for war industry workers. It was a lively place too, with childcare for working moms and recreational programs for children and adults. Its Fair Mount Citizens Council ran March of Dime dances, raising $120 at one dance for mother and child health care.

Many of its residents labored in Richmond's Kaiser shipyards or helped produce tanks in that city's Ford Assembly plant. In El Cerrito itself, the largest industry in a non-industrial town, TEPCO (the Technical Porcelain Co.) produced dishes for the Navy and the Army Medical Corps.

Ed Valentino, who would emerge after the war as a leader of El Cerrito's Good Government League, was president of the volunteer Cerrito Safety

Council. Leo Armstrong, who would oppose the Good Government League after the war, ran the council's traffic safety committee.

The Cerrito Ration Board kept an eye out for folks who violated rules designed to conserve war material. Those who wasted gas by driving faster than 35—before the war, the speed limit on San Pablo Avenue was 55—were forced to forfeit ration coupons.

Drive too much and you'd face retribution for "abuse of tires."

A tin drive was always underway, as were war bond drives. On top of their paper drives, the boys from the Chung Mei home were collecting used brooms and mops, as there wasn't enough virgin wood to supply broom and mop factories.

Red Cross volunteers were busy, sewing up 1,400 soldier kits, 56 men's jackets, and much more at their production room at Fairmount and Colusa Avenues.[88]

Young men from El Cerrito were still dying in 1944, and serving heroically. Sgt. Gerald "Shorty" Gray, who'd flown more than 50 missions in the Pacific, dropping supplies, landing in fields near Japanese bases, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Second lieutenant Robert L. Stoner, whose home was on Seaview Place, was being "held in (a) Nazi prison camp," after his B-17 was shot down over Stuttgart.

Some soldiers were coming home too, including infantryman Alan

Ca 1945. Looking southeast towards El Cerrito High and Albany Hill from the hills. El Cerrito High is clearly visible. Beyond El Cerrito High the grandstand of the long-gone dog track is visible.
El Cerrito Historical Society

Chan, a Chung Mei boy who'd fought "in the thick of things in the invasion of France."

"Worried because of no news of the lad," the Journal announced, "it was indeed a surprise for him to walk in without announcement."[89]

In many ways, though, life seemed normal in El Cerrito and its hinterlands. The 21 Supper Club, Club Kona, and perhaps 20 other nightclubs and late-night restaurants were entertaining locals and war workers. Violet Wong, the city's longtime restaurateur was serving "famous Chinese Food now at the Six Bells only." Gourmands could also frequent The Cerrito Coffee Co., "High grade Central and Southern American Mountain Coffee roasted fresh every day."[90]

At the start of 1945, after much council controversy, parking meters were installed along the avenue. Equally controversial was another council decision, though it ultimately passed with a unanimous vote—establishing a system of civil service for city employees, thus doing away with rampant cronyism. This was one of the city's first steps to clean up corruption, an effort that would speed up in the years after the war.

Much as the war spurred immense growth to El Cerrito, its affect on Richmond was infinitely greater. Richmond saw its shoreline completely transformed, Easter Hill reduced to rubble to create bay fill, marshlands converted into some of the largest shipyards in the nation, and its population zoom from 23,000 in 1941 to 100,000 in 1945.

The war had a major impact on Stege Sanitary District. Its planners and sewer employees had never before had so much to do in so little time—and in a war emergency.

Stege had to upgrade facilities throughout the district to handle an increased population of war workers, who doubled up in homes throughout the area and lived in several large trailer camps and other temporary quarters.

Stege also had to provide emergency service to the Albany waterfront where a racetrack (for thoroughbreds, not greyhounds) became a Naval Landing Force Equipment Depot, "the largest amphibious force center" in the country.[91]

Even before the war started, Stege had plenty to do to keep its system functioning. A report called for spending $374,641 for new and improved sewers and sump pumps at "Point Isabel Junction," in the lowlands of No Man's Land.

"The sump can be used later as a part of the Disposal System Plant which will have to be constructed in the not far distant future to prevent dumping into the bay waters of sewage," Stege engineer Edward K. Hussey wrote.[92]

Wartime growth only made matters worse. By the end of 1943, El Cerrito had a population of 16,624. The Department of Commerce said the city had about 5,000 houses, with only few vacancies.

"Despite the huge increase shown, with more than 10,000 additional persons residing here since 1940, we are not a crowded city," the Journal said, saying the numbers showed that, on average, just over three people lived in each house.

Board resolutions show how Stege scurried to meet the need for increased sewage capacity—and to pay for it. Resolutions in 1942 show Hussey applying for funds from the Federal Works Agency for relief sewers.

Throughout 1943, resolutions show Stege providing sewage service for California Housing Project 4179 for war workers, and for added sewage service in Albany. Resolution 166 spells out the cost sharing for a project to connect the Fair Mount trailers to Stege's 48-inch Point Isabel outfall, with the federal government paying 75 percent of the cost.

Seven resolutions later Stege was seeking to raise its share by authorizing a bond election to raise $36,000. The bond sale was approved in late 1943.

By mid 1944 Stege was rehabbing its Central and Fairmount Avenue mains to provide added capacity for war housing.[93]

The strains placed on Stege during the war and, even more, the strains placed on San Francisco Bay and on people living or working within sight or smell of the bay, clearly foreshadowed what was to come once the war ended—a ban on the dumping of raw sewage into the bay, no matter how far from shore.

CHAPTER 11

Anyone with two eyes in his head can see the one-armed bandits anyplace they care to go

The post-war building boom in El Cerrito started even before the war ended. In March 1944, the city granted a permit for a model home—a three-room concrete home that "may solve (the) material shortage" and "revolutionize home building."

"When the war is over and normal activities are resumed," the Journal wrote, "we must be ready to continue with our home building program which was making such rapid strides in pre-Pearl Harbor days."[94]

VJ Day and Victory in Europe brought euphoria upon America, an optimism that affected El Cerrito and environs as deeply as anywhere in the nation. It would be a new day for the city, reformers hoped, with civil service reform and anti-gambling legislation driving out corruption and vice, and with new parks

People line up to buy rationed cigarettes during World War II at the Arlington Pharmacy in Kensington
Contra Costa County Historical Society

and playgrounds for the children.

For years El Cerrito's City Council had been a kind of battlefield. Members accused each other of covering up for gamblers. They shouted, stomped out of the room, and occasionally threatened each other with violence. One councilman accused the police chief of confiscating slot machines, pretending to destroy them, but returning them to gamblers instead.

"The commissioner of police and the council keep reiterating that there is no gambling in El Cerrito," Roy Noftz, president of the Central El Cerrito Improvement Club charged at a meeting. "But anyone with two eyes in his head can see the one-armed bandits anyplace they care to go and at any time."

By the time the bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some Cerritans were saying enough. By the fall of 1945, thirty-five "businessmen" met at the Boy Scout's hall and "took the first step which may lead to the cleanup of El Cerrito politics," seeking to recall three councilmen. The goal was to remake city government, bringing in a professional city manager to further reduce cronyism in hiring and firing.

They named themselves the El Cerrito Good Government League, held seminars on the city manager form of government, and hired an attorney.

Pressure, much of it from the Good Government League, was growing to end gambling. In April 1946, the Journal announced, "Draw poker to end here on June 30, '47." The city, which allowed poker under a local option granted by the state, had seven legal poker clubs with a total of 26 tables and earned $7,000 a year in permit fees. Slots, however, and other forms of gambling had never been legal.

"I personally feel that no amount of revenue that we might derive from this type of business justifies a continuance of that which we know to be wrong," said Ed Valentino, a member of the League who was in the running for a council seat. (Many years later he would also serve on the Stege board.)

A week later the recall succeeded, despite last minute hit pieces that accused recall backers of being Communists. The recall, which won by a margin of two-and-a-half to one, removed three councilmen. Six weeks later an election to fill the spots put Good Government members on the council.[95]

It was a good time for reformers.

Sharing in the unbridled faith in the future were realtors and developers, who foresaw an East Bay to come that in large part never came.

From the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, when the environmental movement took hold and environmental laws requiring extended public hearings and impact statements were passed, the Berkeley-to-Richmond area saw grandiose proposals for everything from bay-filled international airports to new cities in undeveloped Wildcat Canyon, which until recently had been reserved as watershed.

The absolute conviction expressed by developers and politicians that such development should, and inevitably would, occur, seems in hindsight so naïve as to be charming.

It's good to remember, by the way, that even as the war ended El Cerrito, the Richmond Annex and Kensington were still largely rural, with grassy hillsides and remnants of dairying, and empty, sometimes marshy lots.

A riding academy on Fairmount Avenue, not far from the Fair Mount trailer park, was a headache, as was a nearby stable for draft horses. Neighbors protested "the keeping of live stock too near to homes," complaining of unsanitary barns "without proper sanitary precautions."[96]

But when Earl O. Mills, a well-regarded city planner from St. Louis, looked at El Cerrito and environs, he wasn't seeing a cow town. Mills, who in 1948 helped develop plans for a "Bayshore Park on Richmond-Albany Tidelands," envisioned filling the bay from Golden Gate Fields past Point Isabel, with housing, shopping centers, a small craft harbor, wildlife lagoon, and a beach for swimming complete with a bath house.

Although other proposals for massive shoreline development were proposed over the next two decades (including a "vast shore plan" in the early

Group with last Streetcar No. 963 in Kensington Contra Costa County Historical Society

1960s from Santa Fe Land, which included high rises, a junior college, a new island or two, and an airport north of "Albany Bay"), few came to fruition. The highrises in Emeryville and along Albany Hill suggest what the entire area could have become.

Point Isabel, where Stege had built its outfall in the early 1930s, was extensively rebuilt and expanded for industrial development—which in the end amounted to a handful of warehouses and a bulk mail distribution center. Santa Fe never did deliver on its promise to build an industrial park there featuring "ulta-modern architecture."[97]

Two landfills, one offshore in Berkeley and the other in Albany, were once slated for intensive development. But development was done in by restrictions imposed by the Bay Conservation and Development Commission in the late 1960s and campaigns by environmentalists.

Besides proposing bay development, the 1948 Earl Mills plan looked to the hills as well, proposing that a parkway be built alongside Wildcat Creek in Wildcat Canyon, stretching from Richmond's Alvarado Park (today the western entrance to Wildcat Canyon Regional Park) to Tilden Regional Park in Berkeley. It would have opened Wildcat Canyon, then and today mostly chaparral and laurel-shaded creeks, to urbanization.[98]

The plan was received warmly by most authorities.

Another plan for Wildcat Canyon came before Stege in 1955, 75 acres of garden apartments and high-priced homes and a shopping center in the middle of the canyon. Kensington residents opposed the project, which would have built a dense residential-commercial complex alongside their sylvan enclave.

Stege considered annexing the area, dubbing the districts Kensington Highlands Tract 2 and Wildcat Highlands Tract 1. Project proponents Max Walden and Charles T. Blair pushed to incorporate Kensington as a city.

But the proposal found little favor. Alvin Burton, president of the Contra Costa Park and Recreation Council, urged the East Bay Regional Park District to acquire the land instead, calling the proposed development a "desecration of the nature area." Residents of Kensington turned in a petition with 442 names opposed to the plan, and the El Cerrito City Council opposed it as well.

But the developers sought to annex their property to Richmond—and succeeded in 1956.

The development in Wildcat, much debated and amended, struggled on until 1962, when, the board announced, "Stege will not serve Wildcat." The development would simply overload the system, Al Baxter said.[99]

Contemporary attitudes about the inevitability of development may be suggested by columnist Russ Whiting's comment on the fire, almost certainly arson, that destroyed Victor Castro's adobe in 1956. The adobe, the oldest building in El Cerrito, once operated as the Rancho San Pablo club, occupied land slated to become El Cerrito Plaza, an open-air shopping mall.

"No matter. It was already doomed to succumb to the march of progress."[100]

In the years after the war, Stege clearly believed it had to build a system for a city, predicting the district's population would hit 110,000 by 1975, not a community of small homes and dairies.

Rapid residential growth right after the war required Stege to fund sewers through a rapid succession of assessment districts. "104 new homes in El Cerrito in past year," the Journal reported at the start of 1946. "Inspector Randall (the city engineer) stated today that home building in El Cerrito is bound to reach amazing figures during the coming year." "July permits... top all months," the paper reported in August, with Randall saying, "This year will represent an all time high in local building."

In 1946 and 1947 Stege created two assessment districts for Havenside Village, one in the El Cerrito portion of the tract, the other in Kensington. In 1948, in the north of town, districts were created for Alta Punta Tract and Richmond Sea View Tracts, Arlington Manor and the "Northern Drainage Area."

Also in 1948, districts were established in central El Cerrito, for portions of North Berkeley Terrace and Schmidt Village Tracts. By 1953, assessments were underway for Alta Punta Terrace and Kensington Highlands.

Stege was scurrying about most of these tracts, securing easements so it could run its sewers.[101]

But the challenge Stege directors faced was about more than accommodating growth. They had to meet strict new state rules that banned dumping raw sewage—an effort that has come to define the district's history to the present day.

CHAPTER 12

The best solution and cheapest for the Stege Sanitary District

Intimations that dumping raw sewage in the Bay would not long continue came as early as the 1930s. No one walking by the bayshore or driving by the bay could escape the smell. And more and more people were getting a close look at the Bay, thanks to the 1936 completion of the Bay Bridge, and the opening in 1939 of the Golden Gate International Exposition on the newly created Treasure Island between Oakland and San Francisco.

The Bay's oyster beds were gone, so were "the delicate Bay shrimp." And for people driving across the bridge, "on hot days even the perfume of massed

Bay Bridge East span under construction, 1935. Photo: Joseph Marty

flower beds at the fair faded before the overwhelming stink of the tidelands. The East Bay, as seen by the San Francisco press, was becoming a most undesirable place to live."

In 1938, a regional study sponsored by the East Bay Municipal Utility District on sewage and water quality was underway, with El Cerrito contributing $1,190.

The result was the "Hyde Report" of 1941, named for author Charles Gillman Hyde, a University of California Berkeley professor and sanitary engineer, called "Dean of Sanitary Engineering of the West."

"The West is a fairer, sweeter land because of his concentrated work on its water," University of California president Robert Gordon Sproul said of Hyde, awarding him an honorary degree in 1944.[102]

The report called for providing primary treatment for wastewater entering the Bay. It served as a planning tool for decades to come for EBMUD and neighboring sanitary districts. It led eventually to construction of EBMUD's primary and later secondary treatment plant near the foot of the Bay Bridge.

Primary treatment removes large and medium-sized solids using screens, and removes smaller solids by letting them sink to the bottom of sedimentation tanks. Lighter materials are skimmed off the top. Secondary treatment uses microorganisms to consume or neutralize organic compounds. Primary treatment can include some biological methods as well.

In 1945, the state Department of Public Health warned Stege and Richmond sewage officials that changes were in store, suggesting that Richmond and Stege seek "a common sewage disposal elsewhere" than into the Bay off Point Isabel and the Richmond harbor.

In May 1946, the chief engineer of California's Bureau of Sanitary Engineering informed Stege "that all permits for raw sewage disposal into the San Francisco Bay area would be revoked as of January 1, 1947."[103]

Congress was turning its attention to water pollution as well, passing the Water Pollution Control Act of 1948 to provide for regulation and cleanup in "navigable waters."

It was not clear to Stege leaders how the district would meet new state requirements that banned the dumping of raw sewage. Plus, the district already had plenty on its plate.

John Sandvick, who'd first joined the Stege board in 1918, spelled out the needed post-war improvements in a letter to the county seeking "post-war planning" funds.

"The original design for the Stege Sanitary District was for an area that was in easy walking distance of the street cars on San Pablo Avenue," he said. Growth had overloaded the system and created bottlenecks.

Stege was serving a population of 35,000, he wrote, 16,000 people in El Cerrito, between 4,000 and 5,000 in Richmond, and 8,500 in unincorporated territory, including Kensington and No Man's Land, which by this time had taken on the name "Bayview." (Stege stopped serving Albany after the war, when Albany joined EBMUD's Special District No. 1.)

Sandvick listed eight projects requiring immediate attention:

A 12-inch relief sewer on Lynn Avenue, largely to serve new homes in Kensington; 12- and 15-inch relief sewers along Stockton Avenue to serve Berkeley Country Club Terrace; 12- and 15-inch sewers along Fairmount Avenue; a 15-inch sewer along Central Avenue to serve El Cerrito High and the Blakemont tract; a pump house on Burlingame Avenue to serve the low-lying land of the Annex and Bayview.

"This area has built up very rapidly over the past five years," Sandvick wrote, "and during periods of high tides sanitation is very bad."

Other proposed projects included sewers for the hillside Arlington Estates, which includes such streets as Betty Lane and Devonshire Drive. "Individual septic tanks... are not proving satisfactory on account of soil conditions," he wrote. Funds would also pay for a new Central Avenue outfall.

The big ticket item would serve the entire district—a primary treatment plant, to be built for $225,000.[104]

Sandvick's request for planning funds was turned down.

Stege sought to meet the ban on dumping raw sewage by cooperating with neighboring sewer districts and cities that ran their own sewers, Richmond and the San Pablo Sanitary District. Officials from these districts, and from the city of El Cerrito, huddled with engineers and attorneys several times during 1946.

A plan in early 1947 to form a joint district with Richmond and the San Pablo District fell apart when San Pablo pulled out.

So Stege considered an alliance with Richmond, "although we knew this was cumbersome and would take

a long time to work out."

Sanitary district documents tend to be dry, but some from this period drip with frustration.

"In the past two and one-half years the Board has done everything within its power to solve this problem…. At forty of approximately sixty meetings of the Stege Sanitary District Board this problem of outfall sewage disposal has been the subject of discussion and action, in a consistent effort to get something done."

Stege considered building its own treatment plant, which engineers priced at $450,000. Directors also considered sending Stege sewage through the Meeker line the district had built during the war to a treatment plant in Richmond.

EBMUD, meanwhile, was building a large interceptor pipeline along the shoreline in Alameda County that would conduct sewage to the Bay Bridge plant. Stege thought shipping its sewage to the plant would be the perfect solution, which could be done by building an interceptor sewer along the Southern Pacific right-of-way alongside the bay that would connect with EBMUD pipes. "This is the best solution and cheapest for the Stege Sanitary District."

EBMUD reached the same conclusion.[105]

There was, however, a state law that prevented sanitary districts from merging operations with districts in other counties. In April 1947 Stege asked state senator Tony DeLap to introduce an emergency bill to allow Stege to join EBMUD's new special district, formed to build the bayside interceptor sewer.

"We now know that the interceptor lines of District No. 1 are going to be built in the immediate future," the district wrote, "and if the Stege Sanitary District is going to do that which is most economical for the taxpayers and which is the best method of sewage disposal, it must do something right now, to become a part of the disposal system of Special District No. 1."[106]

But it didn't prove to be that simple—or that fast.

The problem was, who would pay for the needed improvements—a new interceptor sewer for Stege, a pumping plant to pump the sewage south, where it would join EBMUD's new interceptor, and added capacity to EBMUD's new plant?

In a way, Stege seems to have shot itself in the foot early during the negotiations. During an April 1947 lunch that brought together Al Baxter, Eugene Sturgis, engineer Ross Calfee, and directors Elmer Christensen, George Connors, Walter Weyand from Stege, El Cerrito councilman Ward Crary, and several directors and staff from EBMUD, Stege said its voters would not approve a $1 million bond issue to fund the improvements.

EBMUD estimated the improvements would cost $893,000; a few months later the estimate dropped to $707,000.

Instead, Sturgis proposed that a tax be levied on Stege residents, not by Stege but by EBMUD.

"As far as the finances are concerned, or what should be done about the financial burden, I do not think that is a problem," Sturgis said.

EBMUD's rejoinder?

"We do."

"…it should be definitely understood that the Utility District cannot give the matter favorable consideration if it places any additional financial burden on Special District No. 1," EBMUD wrote Stege as a followup to the meeting.

But Stege wasn't giving up. In mid September, Baxter, Sturgis and Calfee took J.S. Longwell, EBMUD's chief engineer and general manager, to lunch. They'd had a change of mind. Indeed, the men of Stege announced, a million dollar bond could pass, "with proper publicity."

Too late, Longwell told them. EBMUD plans for its treatment plant and interceptor were too far along to change. Specs had been drawn up and were ready for bid.

"Accordingly," Longwell wrote in a followup letter, "we regret to inform you it will not be possible to give any further consideration to annexing the Stege District to Special District No. 1."[107]

Foiled again.

But Stege returned with a second plan. If we can't join Special District No. 1, let's form Special District No. 2, bringing in Richmond as well.

EBMUD didn't roll out the welcome mat. Its board scheduled consideration of the proposal first on January 7, 1948, then pushed the matter to January 11, then to February 11. On February 19 it mailed its Dear John letter, "disapproving the creation of EBMUD Special District No. 2, and terminating proceedings."

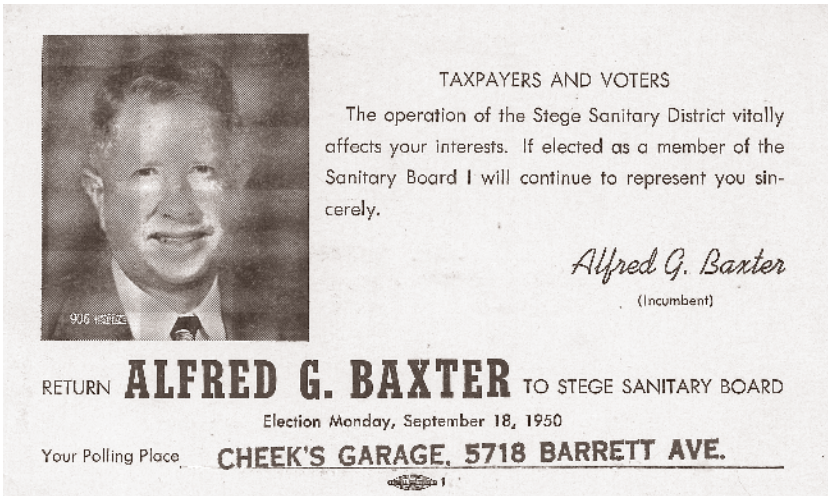
In March Sturgis began negotiating with Santa Fe about buying a "future sewage disposal site on Point Isabel."[108]

CHAPTER 13

How can you condone the practice of dumping raw sewage into the Bay?

At the start of the 1950s, Stege was lagging many of its neighbors. Stege was still discharging raw sewage, and dickering over how to provide primary treatment, while several districts in Contra Costa al-

Earth moving on Point Isabel to make way for the plant began in late 1951



Al Baxter sought re-election to Stege in 1950.

ready had working treatment plants or were moving towards construction.

The tiny farming town of Brentwood in east Contra Costa, perhaps because of its small size, was way ahead of the game. It had built a treatment plant in 1942. The Central Contra Costa Sanitary District, which served much of the central portion of the county, had just opened a plant in late 1949.

Antioch had just gotten a permit to build a plant, as had San Pablo, Martinez and Crockett. Pittsburg's proposed plant had received approval by state regulators, but voters rejected a bond issue to pay for it. Pinole and Richmond were in the same boat as Stege, no plan, no permit, still working.[109]

Stege, meanwhile, had concerns in the early 1950s other than the need to stop dumping raw sewage.

Repairs and improvements were needed to sewers throughout the district simply to keep up with population growth and building activity.

In April 1951, despite protests from two dozen property owners who would be assessed up to $30 per lot, the district imposed a $142,320 assessment in its northern area to pay for sewer repairs, replacing main lines and straightening sewers to prevent bottlenecks. A similar project for the southern area got underway a few months later.

Many of the day-to-day tasks were the responsibility of Al Baxter, a board member who, as the district's secretary, earned $80 a month in 1950, versus the $30 a month paid to the board president and other board members.[110]

Stege remained a tightly-staffed agency, with Baxter working part-time and the only full-time employee, Georgene Sandvick, serving as secretary and "Mrs. Assessor." Georgene, daughter-in-law of longtime Stege board member John Sandvick, was active in civic affairs, a founder of the Richmond-El Cerrito Folk Dancers Guild and Mira Vista Congregational Church.

In early 1952, district inspectors fanned throughout town, looking for storm sewers that had been illegally connected to its sewers. "El Cerrito has a reputation for being a good neighbor. Let's keep it up, and cooperate fully on this storm drain matter," the El Cerrito Journal urged residents.[111]

By 1953, the district was experimenting with an ancient way of locating forgotten sewer connections. " 'Incredible' divining rod design works," the Richmond Independent claimed.

Sanitary inspector Mervin Belfils built the "new style hazel stick" from two pieces of bronze wire. Walking over the site of a suspected pipe, he found this ouija board-like device more efficacious than a mine detector in pinpointing the correct spot.

"There's no explanation as to why it works but it does definitely work," Belfils said.[112]

But after Stege and EBMUD failed to reach agreement about Stege sending its sewage to the EBMUD plant and Stege decided to go it on its own, it turned to science, not wizardry.

In 1950, the district unveiled a plan designed by Berkeley consulting engineer and Stege district resident Richard Starnes for a primary treatment plant on Point Isabel. Stage one of the plant would cost $138,392, $25,000 of which Stege sought from the state.

As the plan evolved over the next few months, cost estimates changed. Starnes' plan was based on a projected growth of the district to 70,000 people in 1975—a population the district still hadn't come near to approaching in 2012.[113]

In March 1951 Stege finally suc-


SANITARY DISTRICT
TREATMENT WORKS

ceeded in acquiring 9.8 acres on the point from the Santa Fe Land Development Co., the real estate arm of the railroad company that owned much of the East Bay shoreline. Negotiations with Santa Fe had dragged for two years. "Even then, to force them to sell, the Board had to file a condemnation action."

The district's point man for the plant was its board president, Robert Copeland, a native Kansan in his early 60s with an engineering degree from the University of Colorado.

An avid gardener and president of the Kensington Improvement Club who lived with his wife and two daughters, Colonel Copeland, as he was often called, had served in France during the Great War.

He'd worked as an engineer, he said, in every state of the union, plus Panama and the Philippines. His jobs had included flood control on the Columbia River and in Florida, and a stint with the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Copeland decided Starnes' plan was overly ambitious and expensive, focusing more on projected growth than on the district's present needs. Starnes proposed two primary clarifiers and two digesters; Copeland argued one each would do for now. Copeland suggested that the plant be built in stages then expanded as needed.

Under the Starnes plan, financing would have required selling bonds. Copeland argued instead for "pay as you go," using funds from the district's rate of 40 cents per $100 of property valuation.[114]

Stege, sticking to its reputation for frugality, backed Copeland. In April 1952 the district authorized plans for its first treatment plant.

Stege's economical solution for preventing bay pollution didn't please the state, however. John Harrison, executive officer of the state's Water

The plant's ceremonial groundbreaking took place in September 1953. Present were Stege director Tubby Snodgrass, Tom McMorrow, Stege director Walter Weyand, Al Baxter, and El Cerrito city councilman Ed Valentino

Opposite, clockwise from upper left: Construction of the Stege Point Isabel plant, May 1952; Workers tie steel during the May 1952 construction.; The plant takes shape; The plant's setting, with the hills of Point Richmond in the distance

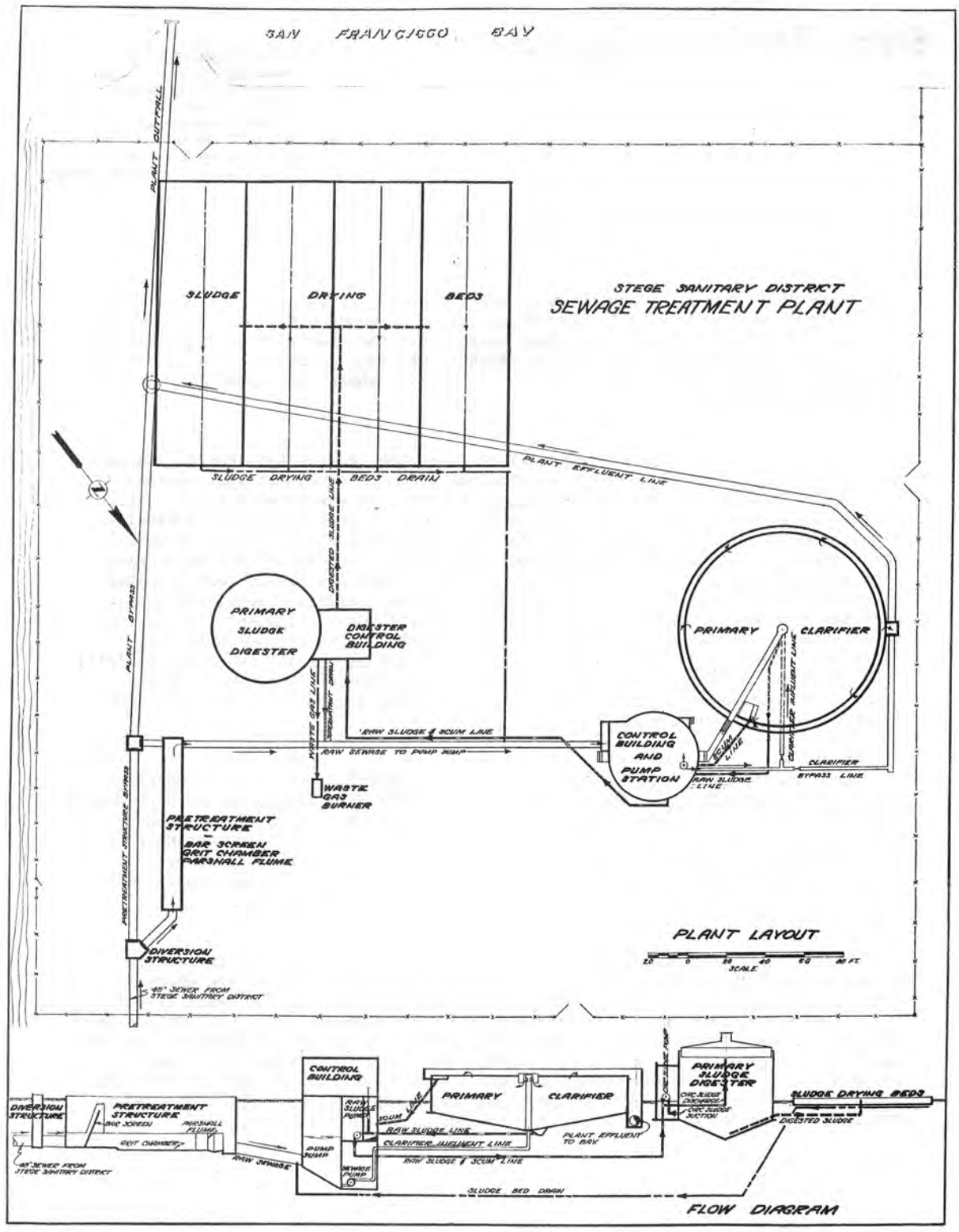


Diagram shows the components of the Stege plant in 1955: a primary clarifier to separate solids from liquids, a sludge digester, and a sludge drying bed. The control building also operates as a pump station.

The new Point Isabel plant in 1956

Pollution Board, argued that Stege's proposed plant wouldn't meet the water quality standards until it reached its third phase, at least several years down the road.

"We intend to comply with state regulations," Copeland replied, "but we do not feel that we should be rushed into piling on extra tax burdens for the people of this area as long as our present operation is causing no particular hazard and as long as we can see our way clear to subsequently solving the problem on a pay-as-you-go basis."

Stege started work on its Point Isabel plant in June 1953, financing it from its tax revenues—but not at the 40 cent rate. It jacked it to 60 cents to pay for construction. In both cases, Stege's rate was the maximum allowed by the state, which increased the maximum to 60 cents in 1953.

Baxter wrote that, had the rate not increased to 60 cents, the plant might not have been completed until 1963. The state contributed $25,500 to the project.

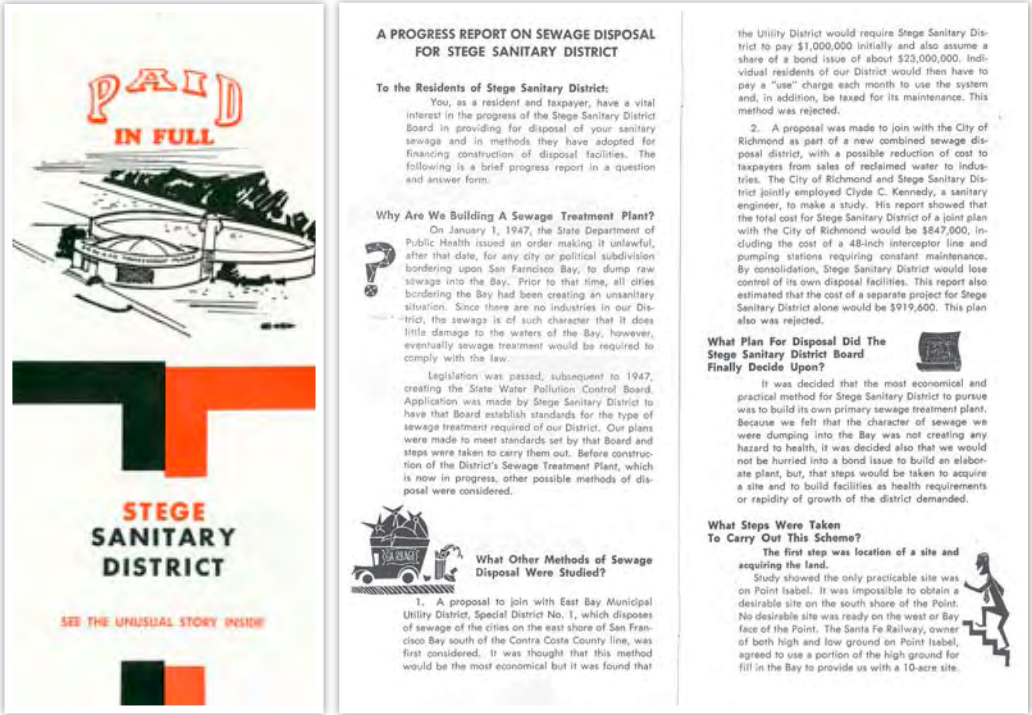
"The old high bank with the rutted road along its crest and the yellow beach on the bay face of Point Isabel are gone," Copeland wrote, describing how Point Isabel was flattened to make way for the plant. "The bank has been cut down and the beach has been covered up to make a great flat square of new land."

At the start of 1954, phase two began. Work proceeded swiftly, and by the summer, phase three was set to go. El Cerrito contractor Elmer Freethy handled the job. The final cost came to $425,550.

"Paid in full!" the district bragged in 1954 upon completion of the plant.

"Happily for our taxpayers, actual costs so far have proved less than even the lowest estimate," Stege announced, crowing about its pay-as-you-go policy. "It is the only Treatment Plant of its size in the State of California known to your Board as being financed on that basis."[115]

The new plant sent sewage from its 49-inch main into a gridded chamber where floating material like sticks, rags and paper was screened away, to be ground up, burned and buried. Sewage was then pumped into a clarifier, a tank with a diameter of 100 feet, where rotating blades separated sludge from the liquid.


PAID
IN FULL
STEGE
SANITARY
DISTRICT
SEE THE UNUSUAL STORY INSIDE

A PROGRESS REPORT ON SEWAGE DISPOSAL FOR STEGE SANITARY DISTRICT

To the Residents of Stege Sanitary District:

You, as a resident and taxpayer, have a vital interest in the progress of the Stege Sanitary District Board in providing for disposal of your sanitary sewage and in methods they have adopted for financing construction of disposal facilities. The following is a brief progress report in a question and answer form.

Why Are We Building A Sewage Treatment Plant?

On January 1, 1947, the State Department of Public Health issued an order making it unlawful, after that date, for any city or political subdivision bordering upon San Francisco Bay, to dump raw sewage into the Bay. Prior to that time, all cities bordering the Bay had been creating an unsanitary situation. Since there are no industries in our District, the sewage is of such character that it does little damage to the waters of the Bay, however, eventually sewage treatment would be required to comply with the law.

Legislation was passed, subsequent to 1947, creating the State Water Pollution Control Board. Application was made by Stege Sanitary District to have that Board establish standards for the type of sewage treatment required of our District. Our plans were made to meet standards set by that Board and steps were taken to carry them out. Before construction of the District's Sewage Treatment Plant, which is now in progress, other possible methods of disposal were considered.

What Other Methods of Sewage Disposal Were Studied?

1. A proposal to join with East Bay Municipal Utility District, Special District No. 1, which disposes of sewage of the cities on the east shore of San Francisco Bay south of the Contra Costa County line, was first considered. It was thought that this method would be the most economical but it was found that the Utility District would require Stege Sanitary District to pay $1,000,000 initially and also assume a share of a bond issue of about $23,000,000. Individual residents of our District would then have to pay a "use" charge each month to use the system and, in addition, be taxed for its maintenance. This method was rejected.

2. A proposal was made to join with the City of Richmond as part of a new combined sewage disposal district, with a possible reduction of cost to taxpayers from sales of reclaimed water to industries. The City of Richmond and Stege Sanitary District jointly employed Clyde C. Kennedy, a sanitary engineer, to make a study. His report showed that the total cost for Stege Sanitary District of a joint plan with the City of Richmond would be $847,000, including the cost of a 48-inch interceptor line and pumping stations requiring constant maintenance. By consolidation, Stege Sanitary District would lose control of its own disposal facilities. This report also estimated that the cost of a separate project for Stege Sanitary District alone would be $919,600. This plan also was rejected.

What Plan For Disposal Did The Stege Sanitary District Board Finally Decide Upon?

It was decided that the most economical and practical method for Stege Sanitary District to pursue was to build its own primary sewage treatment plant. Because we felt that the character of sewage we were dumping into the Bay was not creating any hazard to health, it was decided also that we would not be hurried into a bond issue to build an elaborate plant, but, that steps would be taken to acquire a site and to build facilities as health requirements or rapidity of growth of the district demanded.

What Steps Were Taken To Carry Out This Scheme?

The first step was location of a site and acquiring the land.

Study showed the only practicable site was on Point Isabel. It was impossible to obtain a desirable site on the south shore of the Point. No desirable site was ready on the west or Bay face of the Point. The Santa Fe Railway, owner of both high and low ground on Point Isabel, agreed to use a portion of the high ground for fill in the Bay to provide us with a 10-acre site.

"Paid in Full," the district bragged in 1954 after completing its plant without taking on debt.

The liquid then flowed into the bay through an outfall pipe, and the sludge moved to a digester, a 42-foot diameter tank, where anaerobic bacteria broke the material down, reducing it by volume by 99 percent and creating methane gas, which produced heat to keep the process going.

The sludge was then laid out in drying beds, and sold or given away for use as fertilizer.

"The plant has been designed to ultimately become a water reclamation project, reclaiming relatively weak residential sewage for use as industrial water," Starnes wrote in a 1955 article celebrating the plant's opening in Waste Engineering magazine. "However, the initial plant provides primary treatment only."[116]

In a report to the public, Al Baxter said Stege's "modern sewage disposal plant" was "one of the few in the area." "As a result," he wrote, "this area is a jump ahead of most of the Bay Area."

The opening of the new plant was the occasion for celebrating and reminiscing. Attending one event were Stege founders "William F. Huber, tall and hefty … and his long-time acquaintance John Sandvick."

Sandvick, an original member of the El Cerrito city council, and Huber, three-time mayor and a founder of the district, talked history and joshed a bit. "Even if you can't be president of the United States," Huber said, "you can always become president of the Stege Sanitary District."

Huber, who was 83, died a decade later. Sandvick, who was 87, died in 1966.[117]

Not everyone was pleased with Stege's progress, however. Albany planned to open a yacht harbor and a beach for swimming along its shoreline just south of Point Isabel, and was concerned that Stege's sewage would poison Albany swimmers.

"How can you condone the practice of dumping raw sewage into the Bay?" Albany councilman and realtor Jerome Blank, in later years honored as "Mr. Albany," asked at a hearing of the water board.

Baxter assuaged him that untreated sewage would be dumped only during heavy storms, when the flow through Stege sewers exceeded the capacity of its new plant. Even then, he said, the sewage would be greatly diluted.

Albany backed off. "There is nothing else they can do," Blank conceded.[118]

Negotiations with the Santa Fe took **more than two years** before that Company would agree to sell. Even then, to force them to sell, the Board had to file a condemnation action. Finally, a contract was entered into for purchase of this ten acres, requiring the Santa Fe to fill the land that was low and level off the high land so that the entire tract would be approximately 13 feet above existing flow line at outlet of outfall sewer. The Board was to pay no money for land purchase until the fill was complete to required level with required type of fill. The contract also provided that when the Company completed the leveling and filling of the entire ten acres, Stege Sanitary District would pay for five acres and have a five-year option upon the balance. The five acres gives us adequate land for a primary plant now. The additional five acres is enough for additional construction in later years to treat the clarified sewage to give water for industrial use.

By May, 1952, the Santa Fe had completed the ten acres of fill. The Board paid $65,000 in cash for the first five acres. That price was based on value estimated by one of the most competent appraisers in the East Bay area.

The second step was the planning of a Sewage Treatment Plant.

The Stege Sanitary District engineer informed the Board that it would not be wise to undertake any construction upon the filled land until a year after the leveling of the land had been completed. Therefore, no steps were taken by the Board to complete plans until 1951 when the contract with the Santa Fe was entered into and we knew that we would have the site.

In June, 1951, Mr. Richard M. Starns, Jr., consulting engineer, and, incidentally, a resident of this District, was employed to design and supervise construction of the plant.

The Board determined, after many discussions and consultations and prior to employment of Mr. Starns, that if possible, they would avoid the extra expense of a bond issue and would build the Sewage Treatment Plant in stages as cash money became available. In others words, we wished to build the Plant upon a "PAY-AS-YOU-GO" basis. This plan met with initial opposition from the State Water Pollution Control Board but the Stege Sanitary District Board was insistent upon its policy and finally the State Water Pollution Control Board approved of this method.

Mr. Starns, the engineer, designed a plant to release a clarified product meeting the requirements at a total cost, including engineering, legal and all other expense, estimated to be $425,550.

Compare this with the estimated costs the Board had studied. Now they could choose between —

A. Kennedy's Joint Facilities with the City of Richmond $847,000
B. Kennedy's Primary Disposal Plant for Stege alone $919,600
C. Mr. Starns' Primary Disposal Plant . $425,550

Happily for our taxpayers, actual costs so far have proved less than even the lowest estimate. The Engineer's estimate for the First Stage of construction was $131,802. Of bids taken for this Stage in September, 1953, the lowest bidder was Elmer J. Freethy, a contractor in the City of El Cerrito, at $104,830. His bid was $26,972 below the estimate for the first stage indicating that the final cost of the plant would be even less than the estimate of $425,550. This was truly remarkable and gave the Board great heart.

Later in 1953, the Board called for bids on a portion of the Second Stage of construction. The bid of $87,696 was some $3,000 less than the estimate.

Work for the final phase of construction was awarded July 1, 1954, for a price of $165,823. Therefore, the entire plant will be complete and in working order by early 1955, and perhaps sooner, and at $67,204 less than the engineers estimate of $425,550.

This project can be reached via the extension to Central Avenue west of Hoffman Boulevard at the south side of the west end of Point Isabel.

How Is The Sewage Disposal System, Including Land and Plant, Being Financed?

The Board takes some pride in the fact that this Sewage Treatment Plant and the land on which it is being built are secured for the District upon a "PAY-AS-YOU-GO" basis, within the tax limit of the District. It is the only Treatment Plant of its size in the State of California known to your Board as being financed on that basis.

THINK OF IT! Your Sewage Treatment Plant, including the land, will cost one-half the amount estimated by Mr. Clyde Kennedy and will be paid for without a bond issue.

Interest saving alone on a 40-year bond issue, sold at 4 percent is 82 percent of the bond issue. Thus, the money required, if the lowest necessary bond issue had been floated, would be:

Estimated Cost of Plant . . $425,540
Interest for 40 years . . . 348,942

TOTAL $774,482

Acquisition of land and construction of the plant is being financed from the following sources:

1. A grant of $25,500 has been made to Stege Sanitary District from the so-called "Christmas Tree Fund" of the State of California. This was allotted to us after our plan to construct the plant in three successive stages had been approved by the State Department of Public Health and the State Water Pollution Control Board.

2. Funds from tax collections have been used to meet the balance of the cost. Before 1953, the legal maximum tax rate for sanitary districts was 40c per $100 of assessed valuation of property. Our District maintenance and operating costs since 1948 have been about 26c per $100 of assessed valuations. The difference between this 26c levy and the legally authorized 40c levy has been accumulated in a special construction fund. By the time it was necessary to pay for the first five acres of land, cash on hand was available. Then, too, money was on hand to begin construction. In 1953, when the legal rate of taxation was changed to 60c per $100 of valuation, your District began to increase the construction fund so that the plant could be finished by 1955 instead of 1963 as your Board originally expected in order to abide by health laws.

Does The Stege Plant For Sewage Treatment Meet Requirements of Governmental Agencies Requiring Sewage Disposal?

When completed, the Stege Sanitary District plant will be what is called a "primary" treatment plant. It will be adequate to treat the sanitary sewage of the District so that the discharge into San Francisco Bay will meet the requirements of the State Water Pollution Control Board and the Department of Public Health of the State of California. This means that waters adjacent to Point Isabel can be used for recreational purposes.

Will the Sewage Treatment Plant Provide For Future Population Growth In The District?

The U. S. Government census of 1950 showed Stege Sanitary District to have a population of 29,338. The present Treatment Plant is designed to handle sewage for a population of 40,000. When population in the future exceeds 40,000, plant capacity can be increased because ample land was procured for such growth and plant design, for easy, economical expansion.

What Else Has Been Done By The District Board For The Disposal System?

1. When the ten acres were prepared by the Santa Fe, it was necessary to extend the existing outfall line about 225 feet farther into the Bay. This was done at a cost of $26,497, paid for out of available cash.

2. The main sewers, which take care of the two separate drainage areas in Stege Sanitary District, were completely rebuilt in 1950 and 1951 and relief lines added where necessary so that they should be adequate to take care of sanitary sewage from the entire hillside area without risk of overflow from winter ground water increases.

Conclusion:

Members of Stege Sanitary District Board are residents and taxpayers of Stege Sanitary District and, as such, have tried to provide adequate sewage treatment facilities by the most efficient and economical method for the taxpayers.

The Board hopes you will take pride in your sewage treatment system when it is completed, which will be in early 1955, and points out that—

THE DISTRICT WILL OWN ITS PLANT FREE FROM ANY BONDS AND INTEREST UPON BONDS TO PAY IN FUTURE YEARS.

Robert M. Copeland, Chairman Austin J. Smith
Alfred G. Baxter, Secretary Marion M. Snodgrass
Walter J. Weyand

CHAPTER 14

Boy saved as he plunges into sewer

Stege Sanitary District must have been a pleasant place to work mid century. Directors seemed to have it easy. The election of August 1956, shortly after the opening of the treatment plant, saw three challengers competing with two incumbents for two seats, including that of Colonel Copeland, who had been Stege chair since 1948.

Boy Saved as He Plunges Into Sewer

A Richmond area boy today may owe his life to his ability to scream lustily after plunging on his bicycle into a manhole during the heavy storm water run-off early yesterday.

William A. Barry, Jr., riding home at 6:50 a.m. after delivering his paper route, plowed through the river-like flow of draining storm water at Belmont and Central avenue within earshot of his home at 378 Belmont avenue. The force of the drain-off had pushed the cover from the Stege Sanitary District manhole at the intersection, but the swirling water made the boy unaware of the hazard.

His bicycle struck the edge of the manhole and upset, plunging him into the spouting hole. William swallowed a large amount of water but he succeeded in clutching the rim of the manhole. He began to call for help.

At the nearby home, his father William A. Barry, Sr., was preparing to eat breakfast and leave for work at the Richmond

SAVED — Billy Barry, shown here with his mother, Mrs. William Barry, had a narrow escape from death over the week end when he rode his bicycle into an open manhole. survived only because he was able to h onto his bike and the manhole edge.

Floodwater in January 1954 almost cost young Billy Barry his life by washing him into a Stege sewer. Richmond Independent

Challenger Jack Livingood, an El Cerrito plumbing contractor, charged Stege with fiscal imprudence, not for spending too much but for the opposite. "Look at your latest tax bill!" he demanded. "You (the tax payer) can see no need for a surplus of $153,475.41."

The public was not outraged. Turnout was 5 percent, with the incumbents retained. Three years later there was no need for a race at all since three incumbents wanted to stay on the board and no one sought to join it.

Compensation was fair. In 1958 Belfils, the Stege inspector, was earning $485 a month. The utility man earned $4.10 an hour, laborers $2.15. Workers got three weeks of paid vacation after 10 years with the district. Back in 1954 that much vacation had required 15 years.[119]

Besides running a sewage plant on San Francisco Bay with one of the greatest views anywhere, a direct view to the Pacific through the glowing span of the Golden Gate Bridge, the district moved to another wilderness site in the mid-1950s, an abandoned quarry set into a steep hillside.

The former Hutchinson Quarry, which closed after World War II after years of noise complaints from neighbors, had served back in the Teens as an "outdoor dance floor" and later as a dump. For decades kids had tried climbing the sheer rock face created by the quarrying cut.

In 1958, the city moved its corporation yard into the quarry bed and Stege spent $56,000 on its first real headquarters, after 34 years sharing space in City Hall. U.S. "Lys" Barbachano, a well-liked El Cerrito modernist architect, presented building plans to the Stege Board, "and no modifications were suggested."

Shortly after moving to their new headquarters, Stege workers found themselves taking care of a lost dog, Shaggy Steve, shown here getting a morsel from Al Baxter. "Steve," whose real name was Buttons, was soon reunited with his owner.

(Three years later, on the death of board member Walter Weyand, Barbachano was chosen to fill his seat.)

Stege workers were soon enjoying the spectacle of deer loping by. "It's almost like living in the country," Al Baxter, by then the district's general manager, said in July 1959, shortly after moving in.

Baxter would fire up the barbecue for district parties, his daughter Bev Walmsley said. "Everybody got along. But he was the kind of person who inspired that."

No hometown history can be complete without funny animal stories and Stege has had its share. Two occurred in 1959.

"Probably the first flamingo to ever fly over Northern California dropped into Richmond today for a bite to eat," the Richmond Independent reported. Bob Pearson, chief operator at the sewage plant, spotted it first, feeding in the scenic mudflats by Point Isabel.

"For the first few days we thought it was a crane. But yesterday it came closer to the plant and one of the men noticed its pink color and realized it was the flamingo," Pearson said.

The next incident, a shaggy dog story no less, stars "a mistreated canine orphan who suddenly has never had it so good."

"Shaggy Steve," as they called him, was already living in the quarry when Stege arrived. Disheveled and distrustful, the dog was soon taken in by Stege employees. "Shaggy Steve is slowly regaining his faith in humankind here," the Independent reported.

Baxter named Steve the Stege mascot.

But three Richmond boys, recognizing Shaggy Steve's photo in the paper, brought the news to his owner, Mrs. John D. Ragle of Albany, who'd lost her little Buttons when he ran off during a thunderstorm three months back. "A mighty joyful reunion followed."

"We hated to see her go," Baxter said.

Stege was less kind to other animals, shoving 250 pounds of poison under manhole covers as part of an "anti-rat campaign." The county, meanwhile, was poisoning squirrels in the hills surrounding the quarry, today the city's Hillside Nature Area.[120]

There were times, however, when working for Stege could get downright unpleasant—when raw sewage ran through the streets.

Serious winter rainstorms could cause flooding throughout the city, often on creeks that had been buried as storm sewers. But the worst problems remained in the low-lying Bayview and Annex. In January 1950, Columbia and Van Fleet avenues in the Annex were underwater. Manholes popped and sewage flowed into homes. A month later Baxter was defending the district, saying responsibility lay on homebuilders who were laying their floor joists below street level.

Flooding along the East Shore in January 1952 was the worst in 50 years, according to Stege's attorney Eugene Sturgis, with sewage entering homes in the Bayview and Annex, and in the communities of San Pablo and North Richmond. The county health official caused a scare by announcing a 6-year old San Pablo girl had died of dysentery after her home flooded

A couple cast for fish while sitting, optimistically enough, on the Stege sewer outfall in November 1956.

Opposite clockwise from upper left: Stege's new offices, designed by U.S. Barbachano, show modernist touches, including simple forms, clarity of structure, and Japanese-styled screens; The board room in the new headquarters building Headquarters building and equipment storage, seen with bare hillsides of the old quarry behind;

An aerial view of the Point Isabel plant, long before warehouses and a regional park joined the district on this much-modified peninsula.

(though a reporter checking coroners' officers and undertakers could find no record of such a death).

The official, Dr. Henrik Blum, accused Stege of having inadequate sewer lines, called conditions in Stege and San Pablo an "inexcusable mess," and threatened to end Stege's "thumb twiddling" by seeking a court order mandating improvements.

"We owe apologies to no one," Copeland responded. "Our system is adequate except for flood waters." He blamed the county for allowing "subdivisions on marshlands where high tides bring waters at flood time up to the level of floors" in the unincorporated Bayview.

County officials, meanwhile, promised to clean debris from Cerrito Creek and spend $1,000 on an engineering study. Stege vowed renewed enforcement to prevent homeowners and businesses from attaching stormwater drains to sewer lines.

Still, 10 months later the rains returned and sewage flowed. Liber Pernich, Stege's leaderman, went house to house looking for illegal stormwater-to-sewer connections. Blum's call for court action against Stege was rejected by the district attorney.

"I've heard no complaints," DA Francis Collins said. "Stege is doing everything it can within its resources."

County supervisor Ivan Goyak defended Stege as well, blaming inadequate stormwater culverts in the lowlands.[121]

Undoubtedly the most dramatic incident of high water danger occurred in January 1954 when young Billy Barry set out on his morning paper route only to be caught in a river running down Central Avenue near Belmont and carried into an open manhole.

"A Richmond area boy may owe his life to his ability to scream lustily after plunging on his bicycle into a manhole during the heavy storm water run-off early yesterday," the Independent reported.

"William swallowed a large amount of water but he succeeded in clutching the rim of the manhole." His dad pulled him out after Billy's mom heard his screams. Stege received an injury claim from the family a few days later.[122]

By 1955, El Cerrito, which had just annexed the formerly unincorporated No Man's Land, was undertaking a flood study for the area. By 1959 both the city and Stege were preparing major construction in the area to improve stormwater and sewer lines.

But storms paid no heed. Even as Stege was preparing drawings for its 48-inch Central Avenue Sewer, the street was "awash," the Tribune reported. "Sewer can't handle rains." Stege's plan called for a pumping plant on Point Isabel as well as new sewer lines, an approximately $900,000 project that would require an average assessment of $44 per property.

The project would include the Central Avenue line and pumping station, plus a 66-inch bay outfall and a 60-inch line to the pumping station.

The station, which opened in June 1961, got its first test at 4:15 a.m. November 20, when the El Cerrito police called Baxter at home alerting him to a storm. Baxter immediately called Pearson, the plant operator, only to learn from Pearson's wife that he'd been at his post since 3 a.m.

Nice.

But the pumps, which had been designed to activate automatically when water rose to four feet in the station's well, had not done so, "at which time Pearson tapped the bellows on the indicator panel and the engine started."

The next day operators tested the pumps, which again failed to start automatically. "This is a serious situation and must be rectified immediately," Baxter wrote, noting several other problems with the new pumping station, including an overheating radiator in the emergency engine, one emergency engine burning too much oil, and the lack of a fuel measuring stick.[123]

By February 1962, when a deluge forced the pumps to run six days straight, the kinks had been worked out. The pumps did their job, thanks to their capacity of handling 60 million gallons of sewage mixed with stormwater a day. The high during the storm was 40 million gallons.[124]

But larger pipes and a pumping plant didn't solve lowland flooding for good. In 1964, a petition signed by 19 residents, worried about the flooding "which did so very much damage" in 1958 and 1962, "respectfully request the Stege Sanitary District to please so endeavor to take immediate and thorough action to clean and clear the sewer and the drainage ditch on the corner of Central Avenue at Belmont, in El Cerrito."

Stege crews inspected the creek, found considerable debris, and had the county remove it.

The 1962 flood, Baxter said, did not suggest that the district's improved sewer lines and pump were ineffective. In fact, he said, the sewers did not overflow. The flooding, instead was caused by "a combination of excessive storm waters and exceedingly high tides occurring at the same period."

Still, Stege and El Cerrito crews were back at work in the Bayview six years later, reconfiguring Creekside Park to contain flooding from Cerrito Creek, widening storm drains and reconstructing sewers, funded through an assessment district and with federal housing and urban development funds.[125]

Flooding February 8, 1960: Stege has marked off the location of its manhole as a car swims through the intersection of Central and Belmont avenues in the Bayview district. The photo was shot at 8:45. Almost two inches of rain had fallen in the past 24 hours.

CHAPTER 15

Stege Board divides over appointment

In 1957, the district's part-time engineer-manager Carleton Yoder resigned from Stege, saying his private engineering practice was keeping him too busy. What ensued was a minor battle that divided the usually easygoing Stege board.

Al Baxter volunteered to take Yoder's place.

Baxter, a longtime El Cerrito resident and prominent truck engine dealer, who'd been working at Hall-Scott Motor Co. in Oakland since 1926, first joined the Stege board in 1938 in an unusually crowded field of seven candidates.

Carleton Yoder, the district's longtime engineer

Al Baxter

The election attracted much higher than usual turnout, 1,012 votes (there were 5,100 eligible voters), almost double the usual turnout. Two of the three incumbents prevailed and so did Baxter, coming in second with 496 votes.

Baxter played an important role on the board from the early days, becoming chairman in 1939 and serving in that role till 1942. In 1947 he was back on top as "president" of the board. In 1949 he became secretary, serving till 1957.[126]

Baxter clearly loved the job, the district, and, it seems, everything to do with sewage. A scrapbook keeper, Baxter clipped out every article in every paper about Stege and other sanitary districts, cut out jokes about sewers and manholes, and is largely responsible for much of the Stege archival treasure trove that remains today.

He and Mervin Belfils, the Stege inspector who served as El Cerrito's unofficial historian, must have enjoyed many a long conversation.

A sports fan, Baxter enjoyed Bears games at UC Berkeley, his daughter recalled, loved golfing, and liked to garden and travel with the family.

Baxter also played a significant role statewide, helping found an organization that advocated for sanitary districts—and for proper treatment of sewage—and provided educational programs and more.

The California Association of Sanitation Agencies, nicknamed CASA, was born in 1956, organized by Stege, the Central Contra Costa Sanitary District, and four other Bay Area districts. John Nejedly, a former state senator working for Central San, helped put the organization together.

Bev Walmsley, Baxter's daughter, who served as Stege's secretary in the 1970s and 1980s, said her father sought to work full time for Stege when Hall-Scott closed its Bay Area office. He could have gotten a job back East with Hall-Scott but didn't want to move, she said. Baxter and his wife, who lived in El Cerrito, had two daughters.[127]

Baxter did not have an engineering background; he'd never gone to college at all; and the job paid $750 a month. "A technical man is needed in the job, not a businessman," Col. Copeland argued. But, on a two-to-one vote, Copeland voting no and Baxter not voting, the Stege board hired him as general manager.

One board member abstained, with his feet. M.M. "Tubby" Snodgrass "walked out of the meeting before a vote was taken."

Baxter was required to resign from the board before taking his new job.

"Stege Board Divides Over Appointment," the Journal headlined.

Baxter opponents asked Stege's attorney whether the appointment was legal. Sturgis ruled it was.

At a subsequent meeting, discussing the budget, Copeland questioned the sudden jump—by $9,000—in the office budget.

"Snodgrass said there was no beating around the bush; the $9,000 represented the salary the board had agreed to pay Baxter as manager." Copeland proposed dropping that sum from the budget, but no one agreed.

Baxter, who got a $50 raise in 1958, was the highest paid Stege employee, followed by Belfils, who earned $465 a month. Stege had six salaried positions in 1958, plus several hourly "laborers."

At the end of June the board chose Charles Mahon, a service coordinator at Standard Oil, to fill Baxter's spot on the board through a three-to-two decision. "Stege Sanitary Board names Charles Mahon at hot session," the Journal reported, "and may have buried the hatchet at an argumentative session involving board members and citizens in the audience."

It was Snodgrass who suggested the board drop all hard feelings.

The argument over replacing Baxter revealed a bit of the El Cerrito-Kensington split that would later roil Stege in the 1970s.

Rather than Mahon, Copeland, a resident of Kensington, suggested the board name another resident of Kensington, D.C. Falcone, a member of the Kensington Improvement Club. Two other Kensington residents asked the board to delay naming Mahon. But the appointment went to Mahon.[128]

Baxter would continue on as the face of Stege and as its manager-secretary until 1984, and Mahon, who was Baxter's closest friend at Stege, remained on the board until 1985. Yoder too continued to play an important role with Stege, returning to serve as consulting engineer through the 1970s.

CHAPTER 16

The operator and his patient

By the early 1960s, it was clear that El Cerrito's treatment plant, while still relatively new, would have to be upgraded to meet even stricter standards of health.

The environmental movement was just getting underway. Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," which focused attention on how pesticides and other poisons in the environment were killing birds, appeared in 1962. Also at the start of the 1960s, three women in Berkeley and El Cerrito, Sylvia McLaughlin, Esther Gulick and Kay Kerr, formed the group Save the Bay, which fought against

Point Isabel primary treatment plant

untrammeled Bay fill.

One of those women, Kay Kerr, wife of University of California president Clark Kerr, had her ire raised by watching the bay being filled from her hillside El Cerrito home. One of the villains filling the Bay was Stege Sanitary, while building its treatment plant.

Kerr wasn't the only one to bemoan changes on Point Isabel.

"The other morning I stood in my window and watched the death of one more beautiful tree—another step in the process of making Richmond the leading candidate in the contest for 'The Ugliest Town in the World', " Dacia Williams wrote the Richmond Independent in 1960. "… We are very fortunate in having the beautiful Stege Sanitary System and an expanse of yellow dirt to look at in place of the green growth of eucalyptus and Historic Indian Shell Mounds where the San Pablo Sportsmen's Club used to be on Point Isabel."[129]

In mid-1960, improvements were underway at the Point Isabel plant, which Bill Parker of the Journal found "undoubtedly one of the most sanitary buildings in El Cerrito." (The plant is actually in Richmond.)

Parker admired the color-coded interior. "Primarily, the different colors are for the convenience of the plant operators, but still the result is eye-catching.

"Pipes that carry sludge material are painted brown, while those transporting raw sewage are grey. Blue is reserved for the freshwater lines that serve the pumps. Red alerts the plant staff that the line has non-drinkable water."

"Sewage from 250 miles of sewer lines," plant operator Robert Pearson explained, flowed through a 100-foot diameter clarifier tank then into a digester tank for final processing. Stege was constructing a second digester, which would be needed once secondary treatment was required.

Pearson explained how, in order to ensure that no sludge, scum nor odors be perceptible, the plant tested for acidity and alkalinity, making adjustments as needed.

Methane produced in the digester fueled heaters that kept the material close to 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The sludge was sold to a fertilizer manufacturer. Pearson said some would be used at the plant as topsoil for its landscaping.[130]

Four years later, the plant's superintendent Melvin Klemmick, confronted a potential tragedy—a sick and sorry treatment plant.

"Early in 1964, the digester became upset, with usual upset conditions prevailing: a drop in pH, gas production, and alkalinity, and a drastic rise in volatile acids."

Klemmick diagnosed the problem early on. "Total and volatile solids are run daily," he reported on the plant's procedures, "volatile acids and total alkalinity, once each week. If volatile acids had been run more often, this problem could have been detected earlier—volatile acids are now run every other day."

"What did we do wrong?" operators asked on April 16, as volatile acids rose and gas production plummeted. "By now," Klemmick wrote the next day, "not only is the digester upset, but so is everyone else. Now is the time for action!"

Klemmick activated the large pump "at low speed for greater circulation" but it didn't help the ailing plant.

"Conditions are still declining," he reported on April 18. "Condition of digester getting worse," he reported the next day. Klemmick shut off circulation "to allow the digester contents to settle and stratify."

To reduce acid levels, operators began adding lime "slurried with warm, circulated sludge."

Then, on April 27, a good sign—gas production increased. "Is it possible," Klemmick wondered the next day, "that we hit bottom?"

By April 29, the patient was showing a smile or two, with volatile acid dropping and gas production rising to 44,600 cubic feet. "All looks well," Klemmick reported on May 1, "pH going up, volatile acids going down, alkalinity upward, and gas production well over normal production."

"We nursed it," he wrote, "carefully watching its diet, running tests, giving it medication, and as a good doctor will do, saved the patient."

Klemmick's paper, **"**The Operator and His Patient— 'An Ailing Digester' " was honored in 1965 with a $500 Reynolds Award from the California Water Pollution Control Association, as much perhaps for Klemmick's straightforward storytelling as his bedside manner.[131]

CHAPTER 17

Bay sewage cleanup paying off at last

In 1957, attention was drawn to bay water quality by a massive kill of 10,000 striped bass caused by a spill from Stauffer Chemical in Richmond. Federal and state regulators, meanwhile, were upping the ante on sewage disposal, requiring ever higher levels of treatment. "Stege again fails to meet disposal 'rules,' " the Journal announced in 1959.[132]

Stege undertook a variety of measures to improve water quality. It sought to control the dumping of grease into its system, "a very difficult problem," according to Baxter.

"The widespread use of detergents in homes causes the grease to go into suspension in the water," Baxter wrote. "We scoop off wastes that float and collect those that sink, but aren't able to do much with those in suspension."

"When those greases hit the salt water, they form globules one-sixteenth to one-eighth of an inch wide."

By the end of the year, Stege was hiring a new employee and buying equipment to test treated sewage before discharging it into the bay.

It was clear that Stege would have to upgrade from primary to secondary

The district's rodding truck was built by P.E. Van Pelt, a firm in Oakdale that built firefighting and related equipment. The truck was designed, the 1961 caption says, by Al Baxter himself.

treatment, a challenge that many sanitary agencies faced. Many hoped for federal financial aid—but were disappointed.

In February 1960, President Eisenhower vetoed a water pollution bill that would have provided such funding, arguing that water pollution "is a uniquely local blight."

"By holding forth the promise of a large scale program of long term federal support," Ike said, "it would tempt municipalities to delay essential water pollution abatement efforts while they waited for federal funds."[133]

In March, to fund $868,507 in improvements to its system, Stege proposed assessing residents throughout the district, charging different rates based on location and work to be done to serve that area. At the start of April, "each owner was given an estimate of the amount he would have to fork over."

Tempers flared. But the elected officials who heard about it weren't those on the Stege board—but those on the City Council.

A council election was underway, and the voters let the incumbents have it. All three incumbents were ousted.

"Most folks, including challengers and incumbents alike, are laying the housecleaning at the doorstep of the Stege Sanitary District," the Independent wrote. "Contention is that the voters went to the polls in wrath against the city incumbents last Tuesday and turned them out of office when they really should have been shooting at the Stege leaders."

"The challengers naturally welcomed the unexpected assistance but the camps of the defeated incumbents are seething with bitterness."

One of the vanquished incumbents, Henry Gillan, "is making no bones about being sore," and vowed to get even by running for the Stege board at its next election.

At the end of April, at a Stege public hearing, 450 people showed up to protest, overflowing the meeting room. A second meeting was called, using a school auditorium.

"No matter on what basis you make the assessments," Baxter said, "people will feel they are being assessed inequitably."

Still, by mid May Stege was recalculating its charges, lowering them in Kensington and for businesses along San Pablo Avenue. Assessments also dropped a bit because bids for the work came in $100,000 lower than projected.

In August, Stege incumbents Col. Copeland and Austin Smith stood for re-election. Tempers had cooled. There were no challengers.[134]

It was a busy time for Stege. Also in August, needing funds for yet another sewer project, the board authorized a bond sale to raise $302,000. The city was widening Central Avenue to provide better access to the Eastshore Freeway (today, Interstate 80), where Stege was also widening its sewers.

But the biggest challenge proved to be improving water quality. "Plan to convert sewage into pure water studied," the Chronicle headlined in 1961, as Stege and sewer districts throughout the Bay studied advanced methods for purifying wastewater. "The time is very close," Frank Stead, state public health official, said, "when we'll begin to see some complete reclamation of sewage."

"Bay sewage cleanup paying off at last," the Tribune announced, reporting that 97 percent of Bay Area residents were served by treatment that met state standards, versus 24 percent right after World War II. And those standards, of course, had been repeatedly strengthened.[135]

But it wasn't enough.

Stege was encountering saltwater intrusion from the Bay at high tides, especially, early in the morning, before folks started shaving and showering and sending wastewater gushing down the lines.[136]

In mid 1962, Baxter told his colleagues at Stege that the district needed to move towards secondary treatment and water reclamation. "Most Peninsula, Marin and some Contra Costa plants have already gone to secondary," he said.

"It is quite likely all plants discharging into San Francisco Bay will have their discharge requirements upgraded," he said. Water reclamation, he added, could be a source of revenue for the district.

He also said the district should consider chlorinating its sewage at the plant to control odors. So far, he said, there had been no complaints. But as the largely vacant Point Isabel peninsula filled with industry that would change.[137]

In August 1963, Stege was threatened by the state with a cease-and-desist order for violating pollution rules. "Pollution control costs high," the Independent blared a week later, as Stege discussed spending half a million dollars for a secondary treatment plant.

There was a clean-the-bay spirit


CF 7464 CM

about the land, and Stege had no choice but to get with it.

"Bay fish life springs back as result of pollution curb," the Chronicle reported as 1963 came to an end. A state Department of Fish and Game survey of the Bay found 37 species of fish, more than expected and more of each, shad, steelhead, crabs, shrimps, king salmon, northern anchovy, striped bass.

"Man all but strangled Bay marine life with pollution from his post-war building boom, but he's now redeeming himself with anti-pollution efforts," Andy Morgensen wrote.

Stege too was in line for redemption.

"If we have to go to secondary treatment to meet the board's standards, we want something that will be the most modern, the cheapest to operate and one that will give us the smallest amount of effluent possible," Baxter told his board at the start of 1964.

Baxter let it be known that Stege would welcome the loan of "a suitable boat," as Stege officials prepared to "go sailing next week to find out where the tide goes when it goes out."

The study would help Stege plan its proposed $400,000 secondary treatment plant, which Stege hoped to complete by June 1967. The immediate concern was how tides affected effluent released from the existing "outfall line that lies close to shore."

To find out, Stege was arraying in the bay four-by-four-foot timber floats, each topped with a fluorescent

Al Baxter with operator Erv Single who is working a rodder, September 1969.

Opposite: In 1964, considering its options for providing secondary treatment, Stege studied the tides near its Point Isabel plant. Stege workers George Scott and Fred Lowell took to the Bay to find out.

red flag, 500 feet from shore, then another 500 and so on for a good four miles.

Still, efforts to cleanse San Francisco Bay were not proceeding as quickly as hoped. Anglers were complaining that fish tasted "tainted." The North Bay Water Advisory Council, which represented local, state and federal officials, as well as sport fishermen, stepped in. Its chairman was Tubby Snodgrass, a longtime Stege board member.

"First taste test for fish," the Independent reported. The council tested effluent streams, caught and tasted fish from various locales, and used gas chromatography to identify the substances that gave fish their off flavors.[138]

At first, Stege sought $280,000 in federal funding to build a secondary treatment plant.

By 1967, however, rather than inaugurating a secondary treatment plant, Stege was considering a cheaper alternative, sticking with primary treatment but using chlorination to reduce germs in the effluent. "An expensive process," the Tribune noted, but less expensive than shifting to secondary treatment.

Improving primary treatment, Baxter said, would cost $200,000, and involve adding tanks and metering equipment.

At the start of 1968, tired of trying to go it alone, Stege approached the East Bay Municipal Utility District with a plea—treat our sewage.

By September 1968, the Regional Water Quality Control Board was baring its teeth, threatening criminal action against San Francisco, Belmont, San Carlos and Redwood City, the Bay Point Project-Clyde Co. in eastern Contra Costa, and Stege, unless they came up with acceptable plans within a given deadline.

San Carlos had 45 days. Stege, 25.

Within two weeks, Stege and EBMUD adopted a "timetable" to merge their services. Stege would finally ac-

Al Baxter and Carlton Yoder at the EBMUD plant in February 1971

Al Baxter and plant supervisor Melvin Klemmick used fluorescent red tags with white numbers arrayed in the Bay to check the tides.

complish a goal it had identified as "the best solution and cheapest for the Stege Sanitary District," in 1948—to remain in business as a sewage collector, as a builder and maintainer of pipes, but to pass treatment and disposal of sewage onto a larger, regional agency.

Stege would spend $500,000 to build a 30-inch line carrying its effluent to EBMUD's shoreline interceptor line at Buchanan Street in Albany, and modify the Point Isabel pumps to handle this new task.

A year later, district voters approved Stege's plan for a $2 million bond issue to improve sewage facilities, "which improvement will permit the annexation of said District to Special District No. 1 of the East Bay Municipal Utility District."

In 1970, Stege got another infusion of cash to pay for these improvements, a $406,380 federal water pollution grant.

Stege Sanitary District, while remaining an independent district with its own board and staff, was annexed to EBMUD's Wastewater Service Area Special District 1 in 1970. Stege's Point Isabel plant would never be converted to provide secondary treatment, which would be provided instead by EBMUD at its Bay Bridge plant.

Rather, the Point Isabel plant would cease handling daily sewage flows within two years, and remain in use only during wet weather months, when it would become an "overflow" plant, handling the excess flow due to stormwater infiltrating into sewer pipes.

EBMUD went to voters in 1970, asking for an OK to raise $60 million through bonds to rebuild a state-of-the-art plant by the Bay Bridge.

The effect on taxpayers in Stege, whose average residential bill had been $12 a year, was slight. They began paying taxes to EBMUD, but as Stege exited the treatment field, cutting its staff from 20 to about 16, it also dropped its assessment.[139]

Stege finally hooked into EBMUD's system in 1972, just in time for Stege to meet the requirements of the 1972 federal Clean Water Act.

The Clean Water Act provided significant federal funding for wastewater treatment for the next three decades.

Federal matching funds helped EBMUD build its new plant, spurred new ways of thinking about sewage and water quality, and led to "significantly upgraded treatment methodology and investment."

"Wastewater became part of that broad environmental picture that we are all aware of now," said Rich Cunningham, the sanitary engineer who runs the public works department in Albany and has been involved with wastewater issues in the Bay Area for more than 30 years. "It made for a significant cultural change amongst the profession."

The field of sanitary engineering changed as people who identified themselves as environmentalists got involved, he said. "For the first time you saw pure engineering being melded with environmental awareness. That had not been done before."[140]

In 1977 EBMUD bought Stege's Point Isabel plant.

CHAPTER 18

Like Berkeley, El Cerrito is being taken over by radicals

The 1950s and 1960s saw long vacant lots in El Cerrito and Kensington, many on steep or tricky slopes, fill with glass-walled homes that today are regarded as among the city's architectural gems.

Two of these mid-century modern homes were designed by the internationally renowned Los Angeles architect Richard Neutra, but most were by locals—U.S. Barbachano, who'd served on the Stege board, Don Hardison of El Cerrito, Roger Lee of Kensington, and Paul Hammarberg, who also designed the area's first major shopping center, El Cerrito Plaza, which opened in 1958.

As El Cerrito and Kensington hillsides developed, a network of pedestrian pathways and stairs were established, many atop Stege sewer rights of ways.

But despite this flash of architectural splendor, it had become clear by the mid 1960s that El Cerrito, Kensington and the Annex would never see the 110,000 people that Stege in 1946 predicted would one day arrive.

Even the 42,000 people that El Cerrito council members anticipated when creating a general plan for the city in the early 1970s never showed up.[141]

Al Baxter celebrates at a Stege Christmas holiday with Eugene Sturgis, the district's longtime attorney.

In fact, by the mid 1960s El Cerrito, which had approached a population of 26,000, was losing people, dropping to about 23,000 where, despite the building of some late 20th and early 21st century multi-family housing, it has more or less remained. Nor have Kensington or the Annex seen much population growth.

What El Cerrito, Kensington and the Annex did see throughout the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, however, were more parks, better city services, greater citizen participation, and a growing consciousness that man's impact on the environment wasn't always kind.

Land use planning, once handled by realtors and their buddies in public office, was now hashed out in public meetings by city officials and citizens committees, as El Cerrito adopted its land use plan in 1953 and named a citizens committee on civic improvements two years later.

A parks plan was approved in 1956, and the city eyed a hillside site on Moeser Lane for a grand civic center—which never came to pass because voters rejected the bond measure in 1959. A measure to improve parks and build a police and fire building was approved, however.

In May 1955, after being named an "Honor City," one of 22 outstanding cities in the country, El Cerrito celebrated with a folk dancing display at city hall, military drills at the Veterans Memorial, and Youth Day featuring activities and a baseball game between the Catacombs Youth Club and El Cerrito Boys Club at the new diamond at Cerrito Vista Park, a former quarrying operation.[142]

Kensington, while remaining unincorporated, ran its own affairs through a fire district, adding a police district in 1953, and built its Youth Hut two years later with volunteer labor. By 1960 the new Kensington Community Council began organizing recreational activities for kids and adults.

Storm sewers were improved throughout El Cerrito and Kensington throughout the 1950s. And Stege got involved with yet another war—a cold one this time. In 1958 the National Guard paid Stege a $9,600 sewer connection fee for a Nike Missile base in Wildcat Canyon and agreed to pay $4,000 a year for service. The site, which became a popular attraction for hikers later in the century, closed in 1963.[143]

In the mid 1950s, El Cerrito expanded its borders, taking in the former No Man's Land (now more discreetly called Bayview or Bay View), which had declined to join the city back in 1917 for fear, in part, of a crackdown on lawlessness.

Annexing Bay View came up in 1955 when El Cerrito, which had been providing firefighting services under contract to the Bay View Fire District, decided to stop, arguing that the deal was unfair to city residents.

Both El Cerrito and Richmond then made plays for the 20-block area, which was still subject to winter flooding and sewage overflows and was generally less prosperous than either El Cerrito or the Annex.

El Cerrito's mayor made his pitch at one public meeting, Richmond's at another. Bay Viewers caucused in May at Fairmont School and voted 140 for El Cerrito, 32 for Richmond. A few months later they petitioned the city to take them in. In October, Bay View cinched the deal through a more formal vote, 182 yeas, 41 nays.[144]

El Cerrito had a harder time adding to its borders another area that had gotten away back in 1917—Kensington.

The Keep Kensington Committee fought it out with the pro-annexation Kensington Citizens Committee in a sometimes dirty battle in 1956 involving stolen campaign signs and lively block parties.

Keep Kensington won, with 1,554 voters opposing joining El Cerrito, and only 829 favoring the move—far fewer than the 1,300 who had signed the petition that brought the matter before the voters in the first place. Still, a proposal to marry El Cerrito returned again in 1966, again to be rebuffed by voters.

(In 1982, folks in Kensington who favored more hands-on governance than provided by the county or the town's service districts, tried again—this time seeking, not annexation to El Cerrito, but incorporation as the city of Kensington. Proponents argued that forming a city would prevent any other city—meaning El Cerrito—from annexing them. They also argued it would stabilize finances, in the wake of 1978's Proposition 13.

But, as Natalie Salsig, vice president of the Kensington Improvement Club, put it, "Everybody likes the way it is now. They don't want it to change."

Incorporation died by a vote of 1,686 nays, 904 yeas, 65 versus 35 percent.)[145]

In 1965, Stege signed an agreement welcoming the decade's most

significant new customer in town, BART. But this was one new customer whose arrival actually reduced the number of Stege hookups, by the dozens.

BART's two commuter rail stations in town required the demolition of homes, apartments and businesses, five houses on Fairmount Avenue, nine on Central, 10 homes, one medical building, two duplexes and one four-plex on Liberty, and more, 62 buildings gone to make way for the Plaza station alone.

For the Del Norte station, among the businesses to disappear or be displaced were Golden Jersey Dairy, Atlas Bait & Liquor, and House of Pancakes. Elevated trains ran along former rail tracks.[146]

By the start of the 1970s the environmental movement was well underway—the first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970—and El Cerrito was playing its part.

Folks began recycling at the El Cerrito Co-op, a cooperative supermarket, and at a small site in the hills, and in 1972 volunteers formed ECology in cooperation with the City Council, a pioneering (and long-lasting) recycling center in the old Hutchinson Quarry adjacent to Stege headquarters.[147]

The big issue in 1971 and 1972, and one that proved pivotal in the history of the city, was the $2 million Kaiser-Aetna proposal to turn the campus of the defunct Chung Mei Chinese orphanage, which had later become the Western Baptist College, into a dense neighborhood of clustered apartments and houses.

The defeat of the proposal marked a change in the city's expectations for growth and development.

Oddly enough, considering what followed, City Council approval of the development in mid-1971 came "without a word of opposition." And Kaiser-Aetna wasn't the only plan for

Mervin Belfil's retirement from Stege at Louie's Club, El Cerrito, March 22, 1973

high density housing in the area. The multi-unit Wildwood housing was proposed for a steep creek side lot alongside the Hillside Nature Area, and in Albany, highrise residences were planned for Albany Hill.

Three months after Kaiser-Aetna won easy approval, Wildwood faced a capacity audience of opponents at a council meeting—but won council backing nonetheless, with neighborhood concerns forcing the developer to remove several units.

Neighbors, including the leader of the fight against Wildwood, then turned their attention to the nearby Kaiser-Aetna, mounting a referendum drive to overturn the rezoning of the site that had made high density possible.

Freedom News, a small-circulation newspaper that was too sedate to be called "underground," ran a column by Virginia Rice, a member of the El Cerrito Democratic Club, that charted the arguments between what she called "business oriented" forces and those who "stand most clearly for low density and related quality of life issues."

Talk throughout town focused not just on Kaiser-Aetna but on El Cerrito's future in general. Councilman Rich Bartke suggested that voters be asked to advise the council about density throughout town. A citizens' Special Committee on the City's Future pushed for restricting high density developments.

In April, voters faced not just the Kaiser-Aetna question but a council race that pitted three newcomers favoring low-density versus three who did not. One of the newcomers was Ernie Del Simone, a leader of the Wildwood fight.

The results were decisive, with Gregg Cook, Gary MacLaren and Del Simone winning, each with 1,000 more votes than any of their competitors, and Kaiser-Aetna losing, 5,026 votes to 1,849. Turnout was an impressive 57 percent.

The new council—the same council that approved ECology—was soon protesting Albany's plans for highrises and reconsidering land use in El Cerrito.

"In many, if not most jurisdictions of the Bay Area," Mayor Bartke said, "there is a slowing down of the pace of construction for reasons that are greater than political boundaries. It may be that the building boom of 1948 to 1971 is over, just as the one from 1921 to 1927 ended."

The Chamber of Commerce took umbrage– loudly, and when Bartke hissed back a city councilman from Albany weighed in. "Is El Cerrito becoming another Berkeley?" the Richmond Independent headlined over its interview with Albany Councilman Herbert Call.

"Like Berkeley," Call said, "El Cerrito is being taken over by radicals."

"Under the guise of ecology," he said, "what both cities are really trying to do is wreck the free enterprise system."[148]

Al Baxter, second from left at the new EBMUD plant

CHAPTER 19

I got to where I liked the work

In 1966 Ed Hall, who'd been working for a large plumbing contractor in Richmond, took a job with Stege Sanitary District.

The job wasn't union—Stege has never been a union shop, save for a brief period when the Service Employees International Union got voted in; it departed after failing to win a contract.

And the work was hard, and often long.

Hall, an affable man, lives in a tidy cottage in South Richmond with his wife, Jessie, who's president of the neighborhood council. He started in the maintenance department, one of five men there, cleaning the pipes, doing maintenance, and handling shifts at the treatment plant.

Today, like sanitary agencies everywhere, Stege uses trucks equipped with mechanical rodders to grind through mains removing roots and debris. But in the mid-1960s, the crews did it by hand. "We would push the rods," Hall said. If the rooter got enmeshed in debris, he said, the crews had to dig it out.

Hall got to know the area well, every manhole, every line, where problems had been found in the past and where they were likely to recur.

"When you're in the area, watch. Take a note of it," he said of a problem spot, "put it down on a piece of paper, the street, what the problems are... I knew my areas. I knew what goes on there."

For a time he worked a split shift that had him on the streets from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., then at the treatment plant from 4 p.m. to midnight, watching the telemeter mark the flow of wastewater

The toughest times were the wettest. Before the system was improved, Hall said, "If there were two inches of rain in one rainfall we would have a manhole overflow."

Hall would be on call for emergencies. "I used to get up through the night," he said. "Then I didn't have enough help. I used to take my wife with me. When I was rodding the line she would watch to see when the cars were coming down the street."

He'd often be called for treatment plant emergencies. "I never knew when I was going to sleep at night. I'd get into the bed. A call would come in, the treatment plant has a problem."

"They would say everything's clear. You can go home. I'd go home and by the time I got home, sometimes before I got home, I'd get a call. My wife would say, you have to go back to the treatment plant."

Hall ended up working at Stege about 35 years, as a lead worker, supervisor and inspector, retiring in 1989 but coming back to train new workers. "I got to where I liked the work," he said.[149]

Ed Hall worked for Stege about 35 years, starting in 1966, as a lead worker, supervisor and inspector. Photo by Dave Weinstein

CHAPTER 20

Sanitary district begs to go down the drain

Stege never had a good government moment like the one that had ripped El Cerrito's City Council apart in 1946. True, Stege officials had never been accused of abetting illegal gamblers, though several Stege Board members and employees had owned or worked in nightclubs and restaurants that ran a few slots.

And Stege had always been the epitome of a small town special district, for good and bad—friendly, in the know, responsive; an easy place to get a job, perhaps, if you were friends with the directors, or if you shared a last name.

It was a place where board members morphed into employees and vice versa; where public board meetings were rarely attended by much of the public;

In 1977, Stege sold its Point Isabel station to EBMUD. Today the station operates as an EBMUD wet weather treatment plant. Photo by Rosalie Blazej

Jean Siri Contra Costa Historical Society and the *West County Times*

where elections were often cancelled for lack of challengers; where voter turnout was low and where voters paid more attention to personal popularity than issues involving sanitation; and where, once elected, it was easy to serve on the board for decades.

John Sandvick served 28 years on the board, Weyand, 23 years, Snodgrass, 27 years, and Baxter, 19 years, before becoming manager for another 27 years.

But on the whole, save for an assessment battle or two, and the periodic overflows, residents of the district had few complaints about their sanitary district.

Till Jean Siri came along.

Siri, a tough talking woman, very amusing, deliberately caustic, shared a home overlooking Wildcat Canyon with her husband Will, a physicist who'd helped develop the atom bomb and a mountain climber who'd helped lead the first American party to ascend Everest.

By the mid-1970s, Jean, who would go on to serve on the El Cerrito city council and the East Bay Regional Park District board and become one of the activist "Wild Women of West County," had already won friends and enemies by picketing the regional Air Pollution Board as a leader of the Stop Smog Committee. She'd helped block development in Wildcat Canyon, and helped convert Point Pinole from a steel plant site "guarded by a man with dogs" into a regional park.

"The tougher the opposition, the more fun it got," she recalled. "We won the park."[150]

Siri and an acolyte, Lisa Radpour, began attending Stege meetings in 1975. It didn't require much commitment, Siri said; some meetings lasted a half hour, one only 15 minutes.

Siri put together a slate with Radpour to run for the Stege board in November on the unusual "platform of dissolving Stege Sanitary District." Also running was Ed Valentino, a former two-term Good Government League mayor, who was sympathetic to Siri's cause. It proved an exciting race, with five in the running for two spots.

Incumbent Austin Smith didn't run, but Col. Copeland did. The other challenger was Frank Giaramita, a banker. "If elected they will try to quit," the Tribune said of the Siri-Radpour team.

Siri was the top vote getter, with 1,986 backers, followed by Valentino, with 1,929. Copeland, coming in third, said goodbye to the board.

On Christmas Day, of all days, two weeks after the vote, Siri's salvo appeared in the form of an interview in the Independent. "Fat Stege benefits charged," the paper headlined.

"The picture that emerged from her inquiries," reporter Barbara Erickson wrote, "was of a board with little to do and generous rewards."

Siri focused on high travel expenses, director payments, retirement and health benefits. Stege spent as much on administration and general expenses, she said, as on maintenance.

Zeroing in on an upcoming CASA conference in Palm Springs, she said, "There were four items on the agenda for three days. This is nothing that can't be taken care of in one day."

"The Stege District exists," Siri said, "simply for the money."

"Siri has long complained that the Stege board had nothing to do but collect $100 a month apiece for attending two meetings," the Independent wrote.[151]

Siri, by the way, was the first woman—of three, so far—to serve on the Stege board.

"On Christmas day we received Season's Greetings from our newest member of the board as transmitted through a Richmond Independent story," Charles Mahon, Stege's out-

going president, reported to his board at the start of 1976. "It is worth noting that no attempt was made to contact any other member of the board or its executive secretary prior to or after the publication which was carried on the front page of the newspaper as a news story.

"Mrs. Siri remarked at her first meeting that she trusted no one. We can feel compassion for anyone so devoid of such a normal human emotion. It does not seem incumbent upon us, however, to accompany her on the almost unbelievable ego trip upon which she is embarked. Having failed in several attempts to garner political support in Richmond and in other special district elections, she took advantage of the Stege election, where voter turnout was low, to capture second place. Her running mate finished fourth in a field of five. Scarcely a mandate from the people."

Mahon then brought up a charge by Stege defenders that would be repeated, and embellished, throughout the short but brutal battle that followed—that Siri's goal was to raid Stege's fat coffers for the benefit of whatever agency would take the district over.

"The district's reserves offer a tempting prize to other public agencies who have been unable to meet the challenge of inflation," he wrote.

Mahon argued that Stege was well run and a bargain for its customers, with one of the lowest tax rates in the state and "virtually the only district with financial reserves to meet emergencies."

Stege had significantly reduced its payroll, with Baxter working part time "at minimum salary as executive secretary. His knowledge of the district and the laws governing its operation has enabled us up to this point to postpone hiring a full-time manager, with a resultant significant saving in salary expense."[152]

Eugene Sturgis, the district's attorney, worked "at a minimal fee. His interest in Stege has been expressed by him as stemming from his belief that this is one of the best managed special districts in the state."

Siri's charge that Stege crews engaged in un-needed "creative maintenance" did not resonate with the workers, Ed Hall said. Not surprisingly, he opposed her plan to lay off staff and contract out maintenance. Hall knew Siri, having done plumbing at her house. "I really had respect for her," he said. "I said, how are you going to take care of calls, stuff like that."

"I said, no, it would never work, Jean. It will not work."[153]

Tubby Snodgrass, the board's incoming president, called Stege "one of the most efficiently run special districts in the state. The so-called 'fat benefits' we receive are the same as every other sanitary district in the state receives. And another look at the record will show that we were one of the last to take advantage of them."

"To my knowledge, (Siri's) actions in the past, as a savior of the taxpayers, have resulted only in additional costs to them directly or indirectly. I'm sure she doesn't have the good of the Stege district taxpayers in mind in her latest attempt for recognition. What I haven't been able to figure out yet is what public agency has gotten to her to give away our district taxpayers' reserves. A look at other public agencies in our area will tell you that some are in desperate situations."[154]

Fighting words. And yet, just six months later, after much debate and many appearances by Siri at meetings of neighborhood and service clubs, Siri had convinced the Stege board to sell its Point Isabel plant to EBMUD. The decision was unanimous.

"Jean Siri has won another small battle in her campaign to dissolve the Stege Sanitary District," the Tribune wrote, with the sale of the plant and its 9.81 acres for $458,000.

With EBMUD treating Stege's sewage, Stege's only remaining responsibility, Siri said, was maintaining sewer lines. She proposed passing that task onto EBMUD.

Two months later, on another unanimous vote of the Stege board, Siri got her way, only eight months after joining the Stege board. In August, the Stege board unanimously agreed to merge with EBMUD, if EBMUD would have them.

"Your favorable action would result in eliminating what has become an uneconomic agency," Snodgrass told EBMUD's board. "This action would be consistent with the objective of reducing the number of existing taxing agencies and a duplication of service."

"Sanitary district begs to go down the drain," a headline announced.

"If this is accomplished," the Tribune wrote, "the district will disappear into thin air, Jean Siri will give up her $50 plus fringe benefits for attendance at board meetings and her mission will be accomplished."[155]

The decision to disappear was a remarkable turnaround for Stege. Two board members and manager

Al Baxter initially strongly opposed Siri's proposal. How and why did the Stege board change its mind?

It's far from clear. Was Snodgrass, who appears to have been annexation's strongest foe on the board, bowing to what he thought was inevitable? Was Siri, a forceful and compelling woman, that forceful and compelling?

By 1977, the dissolutionist faction on the board increased when Don West, a manager at Richmond's Chevron refinery and former city councilman, and Art Schroeder, an activist with a background in low-cost housing and anti-poverty programs, both supporters of dissolution, were elected to the board.

But the decision to kill Stege took place before Schroeder and West arrived.

It's interesting that, according to Stege board minutes, Snodgrass in August 1976 was talking as if the plan to dissolve Stege as an independent district predated Siri's proposal—by six years. According to the minutes, Snodgrass cited Stege's "three-phase board annexation policy" which he said was established in 1969.

Phase one was annexing to EBMUD's Special District One, which Stege had to do to send its sewage to the EBMUD plant, but which did not necessarily imply dissolving the Stege board or its independent role collecting sewage.

Phase two, he said, was selling the plant to EBMUD, which again didn't imply ending Stege as a district.

Phase three was full annexation to EBMUD, to "abolish needs for elected Stege board of directors."[156]

Was Snodgrass talking like this in 1976 to downplay the magnitude of Siri's triumph? A reading of Stege minutes from 1969 shows no discussion of a "three-phase" annexation plan, though the board did discuss annexing to Special District One.

Were the minutes wrong for 1969? Or for 1976? If so, why did the board approve them?

Puzzling indeed.

There are theories. Jay James, who watched the fight over dissolution, suggested that Baxter, who was ill, backed annexation because he couldn't imagine Stege going on without him. Larry Rugaard, Stege manager from 1985, proposed that annexation opponents on the board may have signed off on the plan figuring it would ultimately be rejected by the voters.

In any case, dissolving the district didn't prove easy.

For one thing, EBMUD wasn't in the business of operating sewer lines. It was primarily a water agency, supplying East Bay cities with water from the Sierra Nevada. It ran a sewage disposal plant serving several cities—but each city or sanitary district ran its own sewers.

"I'm not certain EBMUD should be in the collection business," EBMUD director Helen Burke said, suggesting that El Cerrito consider taking over instead.[157]

Efforts by El Cerrito to take over, however, ran into difficulties both economic and, more importantly, political—harking back to the fateful failure of incorporation leaders in 1917 to establish borders that took in Kensington. Indeed, had the original city borders taken in the entirety of Stege, city and Stege might profitably have merged in the 1920s.

Dissolving a special district proved to be harder than founding one. It required approval from the Local Agency Formation Commission, which it got in November 1978.

And El Cerrito was open to the idea of taking over sewage tasks. Sewer staff could be absorbed into public works.

But the idea did not appeal to Stege residents who lived outside the city limits, in Richmond Annex, which was part of Richmond, or in unincorporated Kensington.

Then there was the question of what to do with Stege's assets and liabilities. Stege had $935,000 in a sewer construction fund and $215,000 in a bond investment fund. Its tax rate was 17 cents per $100 of assessed property valuation.

Its personnel included a part-time executive secretary-manager, Baxter, a full-time office manager, four full-time maintenance workers, a legal consultant, Sturgis, an engineering consultant, Yoder, and five board members.

There was another stumbling block in the way of city absorption. By state law, a city could only annex a sanitary district if 70 percent of the district's residents lived within the city borders—a percentage Stege didn't quite meet.

The work-around? Hand off the Annex to Richmond. "We are slightly short of the 70 percent figure…," Robert Brunsell, an attorney with Sturgis's office, wrote. "One solution to this problem is to detach from Stege the territory presently within the boundaries of the City of Richmond."[158]

Stege was also trying out alternatives to merging with El Cerrito, in-

cluding merging with the West Contra Costa Sanitary District (formerly San Pablo Sanitary District, now West County Wastewater District). Other options mentioned by Brunsell included becoming an appendage of Contra Costa County or forming a joint powers authority with El Cerrito.

"It appears that both agencies can save money by annexation of Stege to WCCSD," the agency's manager, Bill Braga, wrote in a memo.[159]

A fact-finding committee was set up and engineering and financial studies contemplated. The details over who would pay, however, tripped up the wedding. "If a marriage ever occurs between West Contra Costa and Stege Sanitary District," the Richmond Independent Gazette wrote, "it appears Stege may have to pay all the prenuptial expenses."

By the spring of 1978, El Cerrito was clearly winning Stege's heart, and vice versa. The city prepared a budget showing that a city takeover would cut costs by at least 13.4 percent.

Stege reached a deal to have Richmond handle sewers in the Annex, whose residents would save about a dollar a year, it was estimated.

In September, the El Cerrito council voted unanimously to take over the remainder of Stege. Stege unanimously voted for the deal. The Tribune, running a photo of Jean Siri in sunglasses, emerging from a manhole, called her "a taxpayers' folk hero."

But not everyone was happy—not in Kensington, where folks were afraid their voices would not be heard if their sewers were run by a council they did not help elect.

"The Stege Sanitary District has been well managed and operated up to this time," a group of Kensington residents associated with the Kensington Property Owners Association wrote to Stege. "There is no technical, administrative, or financial reason why it should not continue to function as it has for the indefinite future."

Kensington lawyer Barrie Engel weighed in. "I feel that disenfranchisement of the residents of Kensington would probably be held unconstitutional as violating the constitutional principle of 'one-man one-vote.' "

James, who was monitoring the Stege board as a representative of the Kensington Property Owners Association, argued that if Stege were absorbed by the city, the sewer district "could be used by the City Council as a cash cow, the same as what happens in Albany, Berkeley and Richmond," where funds raised through sewer charges are used for general city operations, not just sewer maintenance and improvement.

"If the El Cerrito City Council wanted to raise sewer rates they could, and it could be a benefit to El Cerritans but not to Kensington because they could use that money for parks or rec or streets," he said.

Some in Kensington may have recalled an earlier initiative, back in 1961 by the El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce and William Huber, to rename Stege the "El Cerrito Sanitary District." Nothing came of it.[160]

El Cerrito, meanwhile, was determining just how much money could be saved after the takeover and how sewers would be run.

Roy Jorgensen Associates gave the five-and-a-half square mile district a once over, and found "indications that more work is being done than is necessary, and a significant amount of time is spent on miscellaneous, undefined or unproductive work."

Jorgensen suggested allocating Stege's duties to existing city departments, reducing the amount of rodding performed to keep sewers clean ("the amount of routine rodding is more than is necessary—almost twice the amount planned by other similar agencies"), and providing less office staffing, saying that sometimes staff are in the office merely to answer questions or handle permit requests.

How did Al Baxter take all this? Not well, judging by notes in his hand on his personal copy of the report. "How simple it sounds," he wrote of one suggestion.

Jorgensen recommended "alternate, more effective methods of cleaning sewer lines" to rodding.

"What alternate?" Baxter asked.

"Any major repairs to lift stations or major dig-ups or additions to the sewer system should be let to contract," Jorgensen suggested.

Baxter's retort: "Sounds good but help is not always available."

Jorgensen suggested the city consider retaining Baxter, who was working at reduced salary but putting in 40 hours a week, "for time spent at board meetings, after-hours service calls, or other non-routine work," "on a part-time basis to assist with the transition."

The maintenance leaderman, Ed Hall, who was nearing retirement, could be used "in training other city personnel for sewer maintenance." Flushing and rodding should be contracted out.

Baxter's final comment: "Baloney."[161]

CHAPTER 21

The sanitary district that couldn't eliminate itself

The Jorgensen report was never implemented because on June 5, 1979 the district's dissolution and incorporation into El Cerrito was killed by voters in Kensington who turned out far more heavily than those in El Cerrito and consistently voted no.

The vote was 1,523 in favor and 2,438 opposed.

The vote was close, and low, in El Cerrito precincts, 53 yeas, 45 nays in

Inflow Infiltration Correction Program Ground Breaking July 1, 1987. Stege officials gather for the ceremonial start of the Infiltration/Inflow program. Left to right, Jay James, Art Schroeder, Larry Rugaard, Al Miller, Ed Valentino, Don West

one, 92 yeas, 76 nays in another. But in Kensington it was a rout, 22 yeas, 374 nays in one precinct, 32 yeas, 381 nays in another.

Sam Singer of the Journal dubbed Stege "The sanitary district that couldn't eliminate itself."

Jay James, who helped lead the fight against the merger, said, "Essentially Kensington outvoted El Cerrito, which was a wakeup call for the city of El Cerrito and it was a wakeup call for the Stege board."

Jean Siri may have lost, but she didn't go away, at least not immediately. Citing the Jorgensen study, Siri charged the district with "make-work" and urged the Stege board to cut staff "to the bare minimum."

After the vote Baxter defended his troops, but the board did take a close look at how its operations might change. For one thing, in June 1978 state voters had passed Proposition 13, which slashed property tax revenues by limiting them to 1 percent of a property's value, returning to 1975 assessments, and limiting annual increases.

Like cities, counties, schools and special districts throughout the state, Stege, which had an annual budget of $255,000, had to rethink how to pay for it services.[162]

In 1981, while not eliminating itself as a district, Stege did something almost as drastic. It eliminated virtually all of its staff.

The idea was to save money and increase efficiency by combining operations with neighboring West Contra Costa Sanitary District, accomplishing much of what proponents of dissolution had wanted without actually dissolving the district.

Art Shroeder (right) at Inflow Infiltration Correction Program Ground Breaking

Stege contracted with West San to maintain the district's sewers.

"There was nobody physically at the (Stege) office except during board meetings," said James, who was appointed to the district board in 1983.

Stege eliminated its crews, though some went to work for West San. Al Baxter, who was suffering from metastasized skin cancer, retired—though, in truth, he kept working, part time. Baxter's daughter Bev Walmsley, the district's secretary, handled district business from West San's office at Hilltop, a Richmond neighborhood about five miles from the Stege office.

Ed Hall, who continued to work for Stege, as well as working on West San sewers, said the new arrangement worked well. West San had better equipment than Stege at the time, which was helpful.

But there were problems as well. It took crews time to drive into the district from Hilltop—then they'd return to Hilltop for lunch. James said maintenance slipped badly during this period.

Stege, like special districts and other local governments throughout the state, faced financial confusion at this time as well. To replace funds lost to Prop 13, in 1982, Stege instituted sewer user charges, collected on property owner's tax bills.[163]

Also, big trouble was brewing in the world of wastewater, which suggested to some Stege members that a more hands-on approach might be needed.

A problem that had plagued Stege from the start, one that plagued sewer operators everywhere, had attracted the attention of the federal EPA and state water quality regulators—stormwater flowing into the sewers during storms and overwhelming the capacity of treatment plants.

"Infiltration and Inflow" it was called, "infiltration" for rainwater percolating into broken sewer mains and house laterals, and "inflow" for storm sewers or rooftop drains connected directly to sewer lines.

In the mid 1980s, the EBMUD plant could handle 170 million gallons of flow a day—which was much more than it ever did handle, during dry weather. But when the rains came down, for two days, three, maybe 10

or 12 days in a season, far more water would pour through the plant than could be treated.

A "five-year storm," one so big it could be expected about that often, could send 817 million gallons a day whooshing through the plant, far more than it could handle.

What would be released during these times would be heavily diluted, but it would be untreated sewage nonetheless—and it had to be stopped.

Stege, along with the six other cities and agencies that belonged to EBMUD's Special District 1 and used its Bay Bridge sewer plant, joined in a $15 million, federally funded "I&I" study in 1980 to come up with a solution. One report rated Stege's pipes as about the leakiest in the East Bay.

To find cracked pipes, crews hired by Stege sent miniature TV cameras wheeling through district sewers, producing "a vertiginous moving picture, like something filmed from the cab of a subway. The movie shows cracks and hairline fractures, separated joints, roots, rocks, and identified where home laterals tie into the mains."

"$17.7 million may be needed to fix Stege sewer system," the West County Times reported in 1985, as the study neared its end. "Sewer rates would soar with repairs," the paper suggested.

Meanwhile, the man Stege had brought in to take over for Baxter, Reese Kneip, was not working out, though he had been Baxter's choice. A former worker at West San, Kneip was spending too much time in the field and not enough time bringing "substantive matters to the board."

"It wasn't that he was a total disaster," board president Don West said, but the board fired Kneip after seven months.

The board had better luck with its next hire, Larry Rugaard, who became interim manager in 1985, then permanent engineer-manager. Rugaard had handled the Stege account for the district's longtime engineering firm, Carlton Yoder, and for the company that acquired Yoder's firm, Black & Veatch. And Rugaard had headed up Stege's portion of the I&I study.

"He knew our business very well," James said.

But just as Rugaard began tackling infiltration, he had to deal with another firing—only this time it was Stege

Infiltration and Inflow repairs on Douglas Drive in El Cerrito

itself on the short end.

"We got fired by West Contra Costa," Rugaard said, adding, "I had to go up there and try to make peace with those guys. They wanted to quadruple our costs."

West Contra Costa Sanitary's proposed contract called for overhead payments from Stege of $3,000 per month. "That's a lot of money for paper clips," West quipped.[164]

The contract was severed.

Stege's directors were still not convinced the district needed its own staff, however. Instead, they considered contracting out maintenance and repairs to a private firm. One firm that sought the contract sent Walter Lunn to make their case.

"We won the bid," Lunn said. But the firm didn't get the job. "We could not provide 24-hour coverage. There was no way we could have people standing by 24 hours a day waiting for Stege to call if they had a problem. That is not how we operated as a private business."[165]

Stege had no alternative other than getting back into the business of running its own sewer system.

In 1987 the Stege community suffered a loss. After losing part of his jaw to cancer, Al Baxter died at age 77.

"A great guy," Rugaard said. "Al Baxter, I've never seen a guy that had more feeling for his district than he did. I mean, he just loved El Cerrito, he loved Kensington, he loved the whole area, and he worked very hard."

"He had a limited capability as an engineer, because he wasn't an engineer… the fact is he handled the management of the district very, very well, I think, and always got things done when they had to get done. That's all."

By 1990 Stege was back in business, working from an enlarged Stege office. "Larry, the first thing he had to do was staff up," James recalled. Rugaard added garage space and showers, bought new equipment, hired Lunn as maintenance superintendent and, working with Lunn and an outside panel of experts, hired the five-man crew.

"I never hired anybody that I couldn't learn something from," Rugaard said. "Remember that."

Board of Directors Al Miller, Jay James, Bea O'Keefe, Don West, and John Andrews

CHAPTER 22

Rains bring sewer headaches

By 1985, some of Stege's sewers were 72 years old. Many were 50 to 60 years old. The oldest were of unfired terra cotta, which cracked more easily than later vitrified clay pipe or the modern high-density polyethylene. Older pipe, moreover, was put together in much shorter sections, meaning many more seams that allow roots to grow through.

Overall, the district told its customers, their sewers worked well—except during heavy rains. "During intense brief storms flow can swell to 20 times the amount usual in dry weather."

"During mid-winter, an average of more than 18 percent of the rain falling in the Stege service area gets into the sanitary sewer system." In places with particularly troubled lines, the district added, that rose to more than 50 percent, causing "overflows of dilute raw sewage throughout the area."[166]

Stege directors, meeting with people from EBMUD and the other Special

Infiltration and Inflow rehabilitation work

District 1 cities—Albany, Berkeley, Emeryville, Oakland, Piedmont and Alameda—thrashed out possible solutions.

Build a much larger treatment plant "downstream?" But at what cost? And could one be built large enough to handle all the "upstream" flows if they remained unchecked?

No.

Build immense lagoons, then, to sequester the sewage-flecked stormwater until the rains stopped? Lagoons work in other areas, where there are wide open spaces. But where could lagoons be built in the urban East Bay?

Nowhere.

The answer turned out to be twofold—expand and update downstream, and plug leaks upstream.

"Rains bring sewer headaches," the West County Times reported.

Stege was required to prepare a "compliance plan" showing the EPA and Water Quality Board how it would plug these leaks, completing the work by 1988. Board members squawked, and asked for a 20-year extension, which they received.

Don West said the job would cost Stege $18 million–$12 million for mains and related pipes, and $6 million for privately owned laterals that connect homes and businesses to the mains.

West predicted that sewage rates for Stege customers could soar from $18 a year to $78. And that might be the least of the pain customers would feel. Stege contemplated requiring homeowners to replace their laterals—at up to $5,000 per job.

"Unless you fix up the laterals when you fix up the mains," West explained, "you really won't accomplish anything."

Stege directors wondered whether all the work would be worthwhile.

"What we're talking about is digging up everybody's front yard," West said. "This is a major disruption and

Stege crew and board in front of new hydro-flusher truck, May 1990

a major expense, and I think people are entitled to know what it will accomplish."

Stege opted to finance the job using its preferred "pay-as-you-go" method rather than by selling bonds. They raised rates from $1.50 a month to $2 in fiscal year 1986, and bumped up their budget from $524,000 a year to $962,000.[167]

West's statement that laterals would need to be repaired along with mains sounds like a reasonable assumption. If water in the ground can't get into a pipe that has been repaired, it will flow into one that has not. But that reasoning was not widely shared.

EBMUD and the other cities, Rugaard said, were using an entirely different assumption—that rehabbing half the pipes in an area would reduce infiltration by 80 percent. "Really? 50 percent?" Rugaard wondered.

"I didn't go for it," he said. In Mill Valley, where he had worked, "I couldn't get more than 25 percent reduction" by fixing mains while leaving laterals alone.

Rugaard also perused a study from Salem, Oregon that showed "you had to get 90 percent of the system under control before you got any I&I reduction. That was enough for me."

Rugaard proposed that Stege go its own way. Pick the area where the leakage was greatest, where you could reduce enough infiltration to make a significant difference district wide, and fix every main and every lateral.

"What the hell are you doing?" Wally Bishop, EBMUD's wastewater manager demanded, Rugaard recalled. "He was a gruff guy but he was a wonderful man."

Rugaard, no pussycat himself, told Bishop and the rest of the regional I&I advisory group, "Your recommended way of doing this rehabilitation isn't going to work."

Rugaard did a cost-effectiveness analysis and focused on "Subarea N," a swath of hilly land around Brewster and Devonshire drives in El Cerrito. "One hundred-eleven homes up there, it was up on the hillside, and the Hayward Fault ran right through it and it had clay pipe and it was busted all to hell."[168]

Although federal funds that were paying for much of the work couldn't be used to fix private laterals, Rugaard convinced his board to spend Stege's own funds to repair private property.

It was an easy sell, said Al Miller, a retired Navy man with a background in chemical engineering, physics and underwater acoustics, who joined the Stege board in 1985. "We believed in Larry and his background and the information he brought to us on studies in different places. He showed us that the only programs that achieved the I&I reduction we sought did laterals as well as mains."

The repairs in Subarea N would benefit the district as a whole, Miller said, by reducing the need for costly work elsewhere, and by reducing

SSD lunch with Board Members and new Crew March 26, 1990.

the need to increase capacity at EBMUD's plant. Stege had to get permission from every property owner in the subarea to dig up and replace their lateral.

By the time Subarea N was repaired, Rugaard said, "We were essentially finished with our I&I rehabilitation work."

"We were first in Special District 1 to complete" the I&I program, Miller said. By 1995, Stege had complied with the state order to reduce its infiltration and inflow.

The rehab also cost only $12 million, not the $18 million originally projected—in part because new technology allowed for trenchless repair of pipes, "pipe-sliplining" accomplished by pulling HDPE (high density polyethylene) pipe through old clay pipe, rehabilitating it in a single step.

Miller also credits Rugaard for being "incredibly effective in dealing with state bureaucrats," adding, "We were usually very close to the top in getting these loan funds." The work also took eight years, not the twenty the district had originally requested.

Stege's accomplishment was noticed. In 1989, the California Water Pollution Control Association named Stege "collection system of the year" for rehabbing the public and private house laterals. It was "the first occasion known where a complete tributary area of a sewage collection system has been totally rehabilitated."

Over the next several years, Stege repeatedly won CWPCA and California Water Environmental Association awards for best collection system, 1988, 1990, 1991, again in 1995 and 1998. The 1995 award cited not only Stege's completing its I&I work ahead of schedule, but its good customer service and safety record—no work days lost to injuries for six years.

Stege also won bragging rights over the cost of its service, the second lowest in Special District 1. The average charge in Albany was $12.78, in Berkeley, $13.81, in Oakland, $9.36. In Stege the figure was $6.50. Only Emeryville did better, charging $2.69, thanks to subsidy from its massive redevelopment program.

The winter of 1994-1995 saw a real life test of Stege's rehabbed system, with a monstrous rainstorm that more than qualified as a once-every-five-years storm. Not one sewer overflow was reported in December, and January saw but one—which was later corrected by installing a relief sewer.[169]

Left to right: Stege board members Dwight Merrill, Beatrice O'Keefe, manager Larry Rugaard holding award from the CASA Innovation Award from the California Association of Sanitation Agencies for its "video inspection enhancement and predictive failure model," Douglas Bruce, and Jay James

CHAPTER 23

The Astonishing comeback of San Francisco Bay or Can the Bay be saved?

Improving sewage treatment was far from the only undertaking that built a better Bay in the years after 1965, when the state created the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, 1970, when the federal Environmental Protection Agency was formed, and 1972, when the federal Clean Water Act passed.

San Francisco Bay Photo by Rosalie Blazej

Much, but far from all, filling of ecologically vital tidelands ceased thanks to the efforts of BCDC, Save the Bay and other citizen activists who kept an eye on the dozens of massive shoreline development projects that kept popping up well into the late 1980s—and were still popping up, to a much lesser degree, in the early years of the 21st century.

Industrial discharges were largely controlled. A growing number of homeowners learned how dumping oil from their cars into storm sewers, or using pesticides on their gardens, could kill fish and changed their practices.

State and regional regulators grappled with the need to provide freshwater flows through the Delta and Bay.

By 1980, the state of the bay had so improved that Sunset magazine, the great promoter of all things West Coast, proclaimed "The Astonishing Comeback of San Francisco Bay."

Water quality was much improved since the 1960s, the magazine reported, with dissolved oxygen levels, once below two parts per million in some areas of the Bay (fish need at least 4.5 ppm to survive) now ranging from 5.5 to 9.5 ppm.

Plus, the 400-square mile Bay (it had been 680 square miles before shoreline development began carving it up in the mid-19th century), which once provided only 10 miles of public access, now had 90—and access was rapidly growing.

Rather rosy. Why then was the San Francisco Bay Guardian worrying, just a few years later, "Can the Bay Be Saved?"

"Nearly every form of marine life in the Bay has suffered a precipitous population decline over decades," Tim Redmond wrote, "and much of the remaining seafood is contaminated with dangerous levels of toxic chemicals."[170]

Ironic, perhaps, but just as the Bay was improving, smells gone, floating fecal matter no longer even a memory, the biological health of the Bay continued to plummet, and at a startling rate.

Striped bass, the bay's most popular sport fish, had a population in 1989 of less than 1 million, one-third its historic level. Phytoplankton, the floating microorganisms that turn sunlight into organic material, were plummeting, due to pollution, freshwater diversion to farms, and to a voracious and recently arrived invasive Asian clam, the *Potamocorbula amurensis*.

With the death of phytoplankton so died the tiny Delta smelt, whose survival was seen as a key marker of the biological health of the Bay and Delta.

Salmon? At the start of the 20th century, 900,000 returned to the Central Valley to spawn. A hundred years later that run had fallen to 275,000.

Clearly, the fault was no longer primarily sewage.

"By 1985," the San Francisco Estuary Project reported in 1990, "treatment had brought conventional pollutants such as bacteria and suspended solids under control. Other pollutants, however, are not so easily controlled. The region and the nation thus remain far from achieving the pollution elimination goals established by the Clean Water Act in 1972."

"Today, primary and secondary treatment removes 85 to 95 percent of conventional pollutants (suspended solids, oil and grease, biochemical oxygen demand and coliform bacteria), three-quarters of the trace elements and a variable amount of other toxic pollutants. The expenditure of more than $3 billion on enhanced treatment in the 1960s and 1970s led to rapid improvement of municipal and industrial effluent and of Bay water quality."[171]

The Estuary Project, authorized in 1988 by the federal Water Quality Act of 1987, was a multi-agency effort that involved the EPA, State Water Quality Control Board, and officials from 12 counties that bordered the Bay and Delta. Its goal was to develop a conservation and management plan for the West Coast's largest estuary, all 1,600 square miles of it, including San Francisco and San Pablo Bays and the Delta.

Its challenges were many.

Still to be found in the Bay, the Estuary Project reported, were trace elements of arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper. Alarming levels of selenium had been detected in Bay surf scoter and greater scaup ducks. There was DDT, hydrocarbons, PAHs (polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, which are carcinogenic and come from oil refineries and auto exhaust), PCBs from transformers, and pesticides.

By 1993, levels of mercury and selenium in striped bass from the Bay had gotten so high the state advised people not to eat more than four meals of the fish a month—and none if you were pregnant.

CHAPTER 24

He did it faster
He was more creative
He was more nimble

When Rugaard, who ran Stege until 2000, was asked what he was proudest of, he didn't mention the district's success in reducing infiltration ahead of time and under budget. He cited instead the preventive maintenance system he developed at Stege, and later went on to market to other sanitary systems as "PicAx."

Rather than simply replacing pipes when they hit a certain age, or replacing the oldest first, Rugaard focused on those that actually needed replacement, which Stege determined using the same video technology that had proven so useful during the infiltration work.

As the technology developed, Stege moved from videotape to digital recordings, producing "a multi-user system on the server, right at your fingertips," Rugaard said.

Using its own computer models, Stege began evaluating each sewer line based on a range of factors, including "how it's loaded" by the weight of trucks driving overhead, whether it's in a wooded area filled with tree roots, how much the land is moving due to landslides, and how near it is to the Hayward Fault, which runs through the length of the district.

Larry Rugaard
District Manager 1985-2000

Doug Humphrey
District Manager 2000-2011

Rex Delizo
District Manager 2011-

"It was a way to keep track of the sewers that is graphical," board member Jay James said. "You can see at a glance which ones are overdue for work. You can see where the backups have been for the last five years."

Rugaard's system had budgetary implications as well. Figuring Stege's pipes in the ground were worth $75 million and that pipes had a useful life of 100 years, Stege developed a 10-year program that involved spending about $750,000 annually.[172]

Rich Cunningham, Albany's public works director and a longtime Bay Area sanitary engineer, credits Rugaard and Stege for developing a modern method of asset management before many other sanitary agencies. Rugaard "saw that computers needed to be brought into play to address all the variables on infrastructure replacement. He did so very early," Cunningham said.

Stege developed its in-house computerized maintenance management system to analyze defects in the system and develop a regular plan for preventive maintenance and system upgrades.

"The person who really did it, the artist who put it together, was Rex (Delizo)," said Doug Humphrey, who succeeded Rugaard as Stege manager. "He's the one who did the work, he's the one who put it all together."[173]

Delizo, who joined Stege as staff engineer two years after graduating with a degree in civil engineering from San Jose State University, said the most innovative part was Stege's video system, which focused on preserving still images only of defects in the pipe, not videos showing the camera moving through hundreds of feet of good pipe.

"People back then would have a huge library full just of videotapes," Delizo said, with a laugh. "And it was just a pain to grab it to see what you want, fast forwarding through a videotape to get to the spot you wanted to see. (The new system) made it a lot easier for me, who was evaluating the lines. It made it way more efficient."[174]

By 2012, Cunningham said, Stege's system and similar systems are in common use. But Stege was ahead of the game, especially for smaller agencies, and Stege's example inspired others.

"He did it faster, he was more creative, he was more nimble," Cunningham said of Rugaard, "and people caught onto the ideas he was talking about."

In 1999 CASA, the California Association of Sanitation Agencies, which Stege had helped found a half century earlier, gave Rugaard its outstanding service award, and gave Stege the CASA Innovation Award for its "video inspection enhancement and predictive failure model."

Rugaard, who carried on Stege's longtime tradition of tight-fistedness, also developed a motivational tool for his crews—rewarding them for cost-saving suggestions, with bonuses based on a percentage of the savings.

John Andrew, appointed to the board in 1991 as a 24-year-old civil engineer still in grad school, cited another Rugaard accomplishment—initiating a statewide mutual aid agreement among sanitary agencies, CalWARN (for California Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network). Similar arrangements, long in force among fire and police departments, were not in regular use in the sewer field. Their need became evident after the Loma Prieta Earthquake of 1989, Andrew said.[175]

CCTV Inspection Van purchased in 2005

CHAPTER 25

Election is first for Stege Sanitary District in 17 years

Al Miller, a longtime stalwart of the El Cerrito Democratic Club and Stege board member from 1985, regards it as "one of most embarrassing aspects of the Stege Sanitary District"—the lack of public participation.

Ask the typical customer of Stege what the district is and what it does and "half of them would not know," Miller said. "We're taking their money and supposedly we're protecting their public health. They're paying for this and they have a responsibility for their lateral. Most of them don't know that. We really need to get better at explaining who we are and what we do and what their responsibilities are."

Booth at City of El Cerrito's 4th of July celebration

In spite of newsletters and manning a booth at El Cerrito's July 4 celebration, Miller said, "We're still almost like a stealth district."

Rarely do members of the public attend Stege's twice-monthly meetings.

In his 28 years on the board, Miller has seen only one contested election, 1994—the first since West and Schroeder were elected to the board in 1977. The issue that provoked a rare challenger for a board seat?

The Stege board needed to improve its public communications.

Challenger Dwight Merrill, a chemist who ran a family-owned chemicals company in Richmond, acknowledged that the district was well-run, but said Stege needed to keep the public better informed about rising sewer charges, perhaps through public workshops.

Merrill, who had been attending meetings regularly, won kudos from the West County Times for "forcing an election for the first time since some of the younger voters were still in kindergarten."

"Through no fault of their own," the Times wrote, "board members of the Stege Sanitary District have not had to go through the public ritual for the last 17 years."

Nonetheless, the Times urged, "Retain the incumbents."

"Operating quietly, prudently and largely out of public view, the present board has done an exemplary job with a lean and efficient workforce of some 10 members while carefully managing a budget of around $900,000."[176]

Merrill failed to convince voters. But in 1998 Merrill did get onto the board—appointed after John Andrew left for Sacramento to work as assistant deputy director of the State Department of Water Resources.

There hasn't been a competitive race since, and public participation in Stege proceedings has not increased, not even when the board reached into people's pocketbooks.

"Last time we did our rates, we raised it over a three-year period," Miller said in 2012. "It was a pretty hefty 20 percent over three years. We had seven people show up in the board meeting and that was the first time anybody ever showed up for a rate hearing. And of the seven people, two or three of them were for it. They just came to thank us for doing such a great job. And the ones who were against it just said, well, we know you have to do it but it's a bad time. You shouldn't be raising the rate in a bad time."

Board members Art Schroeder, Jean Siri and Don West gather at Stege's Christmas luncheon and farewell to West in 1998. All three had backed dissolving the district 20 years earlier.

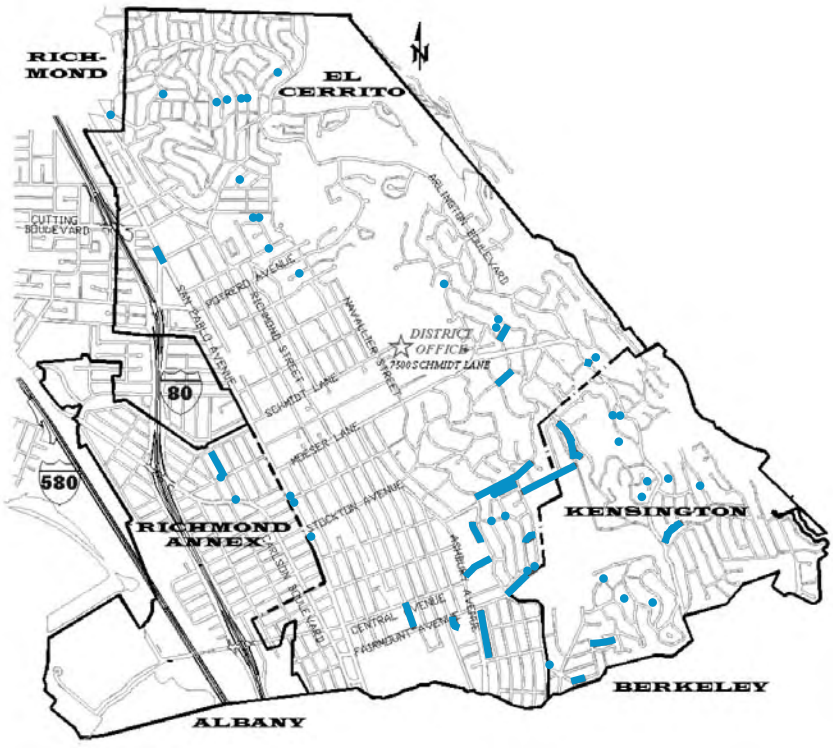
CHAPTER 26

You don't find our crews parked underneath a tree

Stege had a lot going for itself at the start of the 21st century, when a report for the district bragged that "Stege Sanitary District keeps a tight and efficient sanitary sewer system despite frequent seismic activity that can crack pipes, loosen joints or worse."

"…the district has steadily reduced stoppages and overflows on its 150 miles of mains and has created a system that can withstand seismic punishment."[177]

Under manager Doug Humphrey, Stege refined the maintenance system



STEGE Sanitary District

Repair/Replacement Projects — 1997-2000

designed during Rugaard's tenure. Today, the database allows crews and managers to call up digital photos and reports on any segment of any sewer, "all tagged by manhole number," showing maintenance history, root intrusions, service calls, defects and more.[178]

"All this information creates a living, breathing document and allows us to come up with a list every year of the most critical things to get done," said Walter Lunn, maintenance superintendent.

Humphrey's biggest challenge when he started at Stege was "a lot of old pipe," he said. The district may have met its infiltration and inflow goals, but sewer overflows remained a problem. Virtually every sewer in the hillsides suffered from root intrusion—and still does.

Humphrey convinced the board to increase its budget and raise rates to pay for increased maintenance and repairs. "We were pretty successful in doing that."

Stege kept its pipes free of buildup and debris using a Myers Hydro 80-gallon-per-minute flushing truck and two Champion continuous mechanical rodders. "Their slim design gives the crews easier access in neighborhoods than traditional truck- or trailer-mounted units."

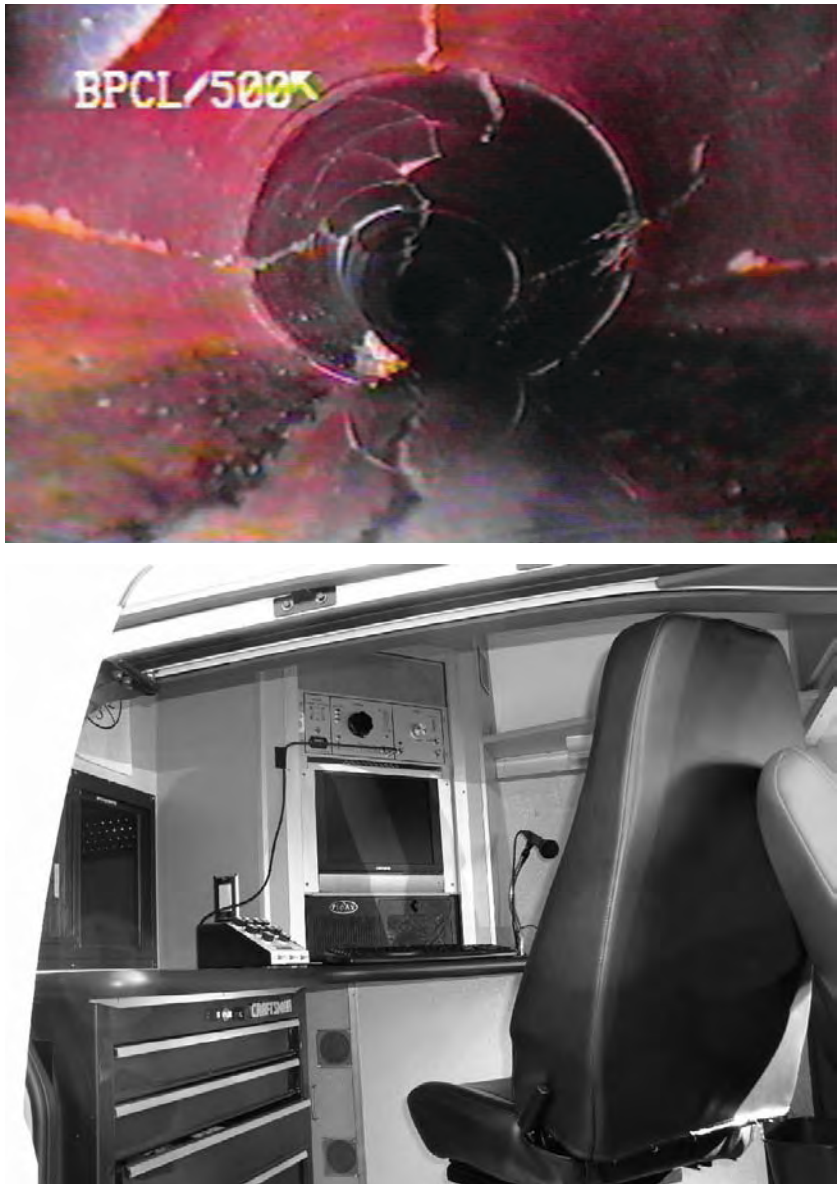
"An essential part of the program is a commitment to pipe-bursting, a technology that lets the district make repairs without disruption to the surface and leave behind a leak-free, structurally sound pipe."

"The whole process is pretty non-intrusive," Lunn said. "Now we only have to dig a small pothole, and in some cases we can perform the rehab directly from a manhole as the bursting equipment has become more and more compact over the past few years."

"We work our crews pretty hard," he said. "You don't find our crews parked underneath a tree. But when you are an older district like we are, you don't have a choice. You have to work hard, otherwise you find yourself in trouble."

Lunn called the 10-person staff, "a lean and mean team."[179]

Working in the sewers is a dirty job, and dangerous. Workers are exposed to toxic materials—and traffic.



Top: Digital photo of a cracked sewer pipe as captured during Closed-circuit television (CCTV) inspection. Bottom: Operator control room inside CCTV inspection van.

Lunn was almost hit by a driver talking on a cell phone. Yet, he said, "We haven't had an injury in 15 years."

For that he credits training, luck, and "intimidation." "No one's gonna get hurt because they have to deal with me," he said. Incentive awards for lack of injuries helps, as does training and having a committed crew, he said.

"You get buy-in from the employees," Lunn said. "It's employee driven."

Every job involves "TV-ing" the lines, using a wheeled robot that has video cameras on either end. The device is attached to a cable and controlled from a studio in the TV truck. With the camera, the operator can see roots popping into the line, spiral cracks and multiple cracks, said Fred Bondoc, who in mid 2012 was the primary TV operator.

"We don't do any repairs without taking a look," Lunn said. "In the old days we had to guess (where the problem was). Now by running the camera through we know exactly where we're at. The guesswork is out of it."[180]

Sanitary agencies are rightly judged by how often their sewers overflow.

Overflows, generally from manholes or sewer cleanouts, result in spills onto the sidewalk or street, into a private yard or, rarely but with far worse consequences, into a creek or into a home.

Stege does well, averaging in recent years just over one overflow a month—which meets what Doug Humphrey said is the industry standard of eight per 100 miles of pipe. "Environmental groups will tell you it should be half of that," he said.

A chart in the Stege board room shows how the district has improved since 1985, when the average was 10 overflows a month, peaking in 1987 at 14, then rolling steeply downhill, hitting six in 1992, then hovering between two and four a month, before hitting one a month in 2009.

Eliminating overflows is hard to achieve in an older system, like Stege's, Humphrey pointed out. In further defense of the district, Delizo said that most overflows these days are the direct fault, not of Stege, but of outside players. PG&E periodically digs into Stege pipes while laying cable, contractors have dropped asphalt into the mains, or an EBMUD water line blows, flooding a main.

One recent incident, and the worst in several years, was caused by a contractor working along San Pablo Avenue—and the problem was discovered by a chance, by Stege director Dwight Merrill who was eating at a restaurant. He noticed sewage outside the restaurant and immediately called Stege.

The contractor, who was installing irrigation, was supposed to dig two or three feet deep. Instead, he dug nine feet, hitting the sewer lines, which are intentionally buried deeper than every other underground line.

Crews responded quickly. The sewage never entered any buildings.

Stege prides itself on quick response time, Lunn said. 'We show up on every call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week in one hour regardless of when you call. And if you call us in our work hours we'll be there…"

"In fifteen minutes," Bondoc completed the sentence.[181]

Sewer workers often act like detectives, tracking down the source

David Patzer, of California Sanitation Risk Management Authority (CSRMA), presents Doug Humphrey with its 2005 award for the district's outstanding safety record.

of blockages. Non-flushable baby wipes and Handi Wipes are a major scourge. "They don't break down," Bondoc said.

If a segment of sewer is often blocked by a particular item, Stege will send a letter to everyone using that line alerting them to the offending item. It usually works.

"Except the kitty litter lady," Bondoc said, referring to a woman with 80 cats.

"You can't believe what we go up against in the real world," Lunn said. "Excessive grease especially around Thanksgiving time. People use turkey fryers and dump the grease down their drain. The grease leaves their home and when it gets to our main line, it just turns into a block."

By 2012, Stege crew members were doing more than carrying out orders from the office. "They're the ones that set the cleaning schedule. They know more about it," Humphrey said.

"You have a certain amount of freedom," Lunn said. "We trust you to do your job out there. We don't make it a habit to follow you around and look at you every minute of the day. We believe that we hire workers that are capable, that know their job, that go out and do it."

Delizo, who became district manager in 2011, on Humphrey's retirement, said Stege adopted an innovative method of assigning tasks. Rather than the older, "hierarchic" structure, with the superintendent calling the shots, "We have flattened out organizational positions and distributed responsibilities."

Each worker is given charge of one task—video recording the lines, running the rodder, running the hydro flusher. "We'll eventually rotate jobs around, so everyone gets experience leading each of the roles," Delizo said.

To further prevent stormwater from getting into sewers, in 2005 Stege passed a lateral ordinance, requiring property owners to repair their laterals when property is sold—despite arguments from real estate brokers that the ordinance would slow transactions.

As a compromise, Stege agreed that the sale could close before laterals were repaired. Enforcing the ordinance proved to be a lot of work, with Delizo sending out letters to realtors and homeowners as soon as a home went on sale, tracking it till it sold, figuring out whether a lateral compliance certificate had been issued, and then writing another letter if it had not.

"It would take me half a day at least every week just to do that," Delizo said. So when EBMUD offered to take on lateral compliance duties from the collection agencies, Stege was happy to pass it on.

In many ways, as the young century progressed, progress could be seen in clean water efforts.

"Aquatic quality in the Bay is dramatically improved," said Rich Cunningham, a longtime Bay Area sanitary engineer. "It's remarkable."

A 2012 report by the group Heal the Bay found beaches in the Bay Area, and throughout the state, the cleanest they've been in years, due in large part to state and federal regulation on sewage plants and industry. Bay beaches were swimmable again, as they had not been in the days of the Big Stench.[182]

But, as it turned out, Stege discovered that its accomplishments hadn't been enough—not nearly enough.

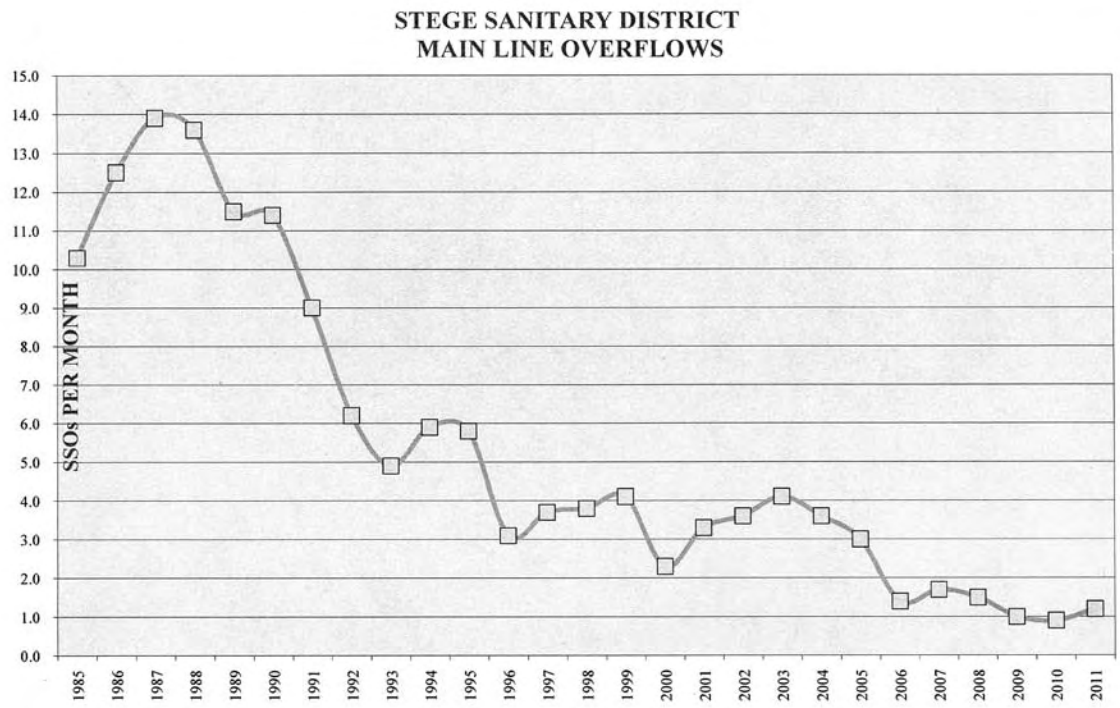
Stege Sanitary District staff in 2006, left to right: Arvin Gonzales, Doug Humphrey, Fred Bondoc, Walter Lunn, Adam Clark, Quincy McCall, Julie McDonald, John Gerletti, Connie Sylte, and Rex Delizo.

CHAPTER 27

The better science we had to detect things in water, the more stringent the requirements got

For more than thirty years, as part of Special District 1, Stege had been working with EBMUD and the six other cities of the district to meet federal and state water quality standards— with apparent success.

As part of the group's agreement with the regulators, three wet-weather overflow plants were established in the East Bay for at a cost of about $400 million to treat stormwater mixed with sewage that flowed through them during heavy storms.



One of these plants was located on the site of Stege's former wastewater plant, now owned by EBMUD, at Point Isabel.

To operate, these plants required a discharge permit from the state Water Resources Control Board, which enforces both federal and state water quality laws.

In 2005 Stege, along with EBMUD and the other six special district "satellites," got an unexpected kick in the teeth. First, the Bay Area arm of the state board, the San Francisco Bay Area Regional Water Quality Control Board, prepared to grant the permit renewal. Well and good and quite expected.

Humphrey described what happened next.

"EPA came into the meeting and said, 'We don't agree with this. Those plants violate the Clean Water Act.' Even the local regional board folks went, 'What? Really? You guys were there and you facilitated their construction.'"

The EPA's action, which meant no permit would be forthcoming, "launched us on a whole 'nother course of action," Humphrey said.

The EPA argued that the plants no longer met their standards for secondary treatment. "No regulations changed," Humphrey said. "Their interpretation of the law changed."

"The better science we had to detect things in water," Al Miller said, "the more stringent the requirements got, from parts per million to parts per billion."

"The basic bottom line is, they want the I&I out of the system," said Rich Cunningham, adding, "They're aiming for a reduction of 40 to 50 percent on top of what has already been accomplished."[183]

For Stege, EBMUD and the other satellites, this means another I&I project, one that could far exceed what was done in the 1990s. Humphrey, who represented the group in discussions with federal and state officials, argued that without a permit, the wet weather plants would have had to shut immediately, increasing the amount of raw sewage entering the Bay without any treatment.

Point well taken.

What followed were arguments and more discussions and even a federal Department of Justice lawsuit against Stege, EBMUD, and six other East Bay satellite agencies—which Stege invited, in order to produce a court order that would buy them all time. In inviting the lawsuit, Humphrey said, the goal was to keep at bay any environmental group that might use the Clean Water Act provision allowing private individuals or groups to sue polluters.

The suit resulted in a "stipulated order," finalized in March 2011, requiring Stege to reduce infiltration. "That gave us protection from any non-governmental organizations suing us," he said, referring to environmental watchdog groups. "We had a federal order and we're complying with it."

The next step, Humphrey said, will be to negotiate a consent decree with the EPA, and prepare an acceptable work plan that would require EBMUD and the satellites to issue annual reports and work to prevent any

Stege collection system workers, Fred Bondoc, John Gerletti and Quincy McCall with the District's new rodder in 2002
Photo by Rosalie Blazej

pollution from entering the bay from its pipes or its plants. Humphrey has proposed a 30-year job that would be complete in 2044.

"There's going to be work going on for as far as the eye can see," he said.[184]

There's also going to be a hefty price tag, much of it likely to be passed onto ratepayers. How much depends on how quickly regulators demand the work be done. If Stege has to get the work done in five years, Miller said, it would be a disaster; if it's 30 years, "That would be really manageable."

The new I&I project will almost certainly focus much more than its predecessor on fixing private laterals.

"If we can encourage people to fix laterals, we think can achieve the legal requirement cheaper and faster than if we don't," Miller said.

Under plans being discussed, private laterals could be replaced by publically paid crews while they are working on the nearby mains. It costs several thousand dollars to replace a lateral. Public funds could pay for all or part of the work.

Paying for a privately owned lateral presents a tricky "equity issue," Humphrey pointed out. Stege's most troublesome laterals tend to be in the Kensington and El Cerrito hills, where folks have more money than those in other areas of the district.

"Talk about 'environmental justice,'" he said, "That's the code word."

Not everyone thinks the latest infiltration fight is worth the cost. Why focus on sewage plants, which at this point aren't damaging the ecosystem of the bay nearly as much as other factors, some engineers wonder.

Sanitary engineers and regulators talk of the "watershed approach" towards improving waterways—addressing everything that harms the health of the Bay and its flora and fauna, from diversion of freshwater by upstream cities and farmers, agriculture and feed-lot run off, invasive species that consume food needed by fish, air pollution, landfills that replace natural vegetation, garbage dump leaching, street runoff, and more.

"Today, if you go to a sewage plant and you look at what's coming out of it, what comes out is pretty clean stuff," said John Andrew, a former Stege director who became assistant director of the state Department of Water Resources. "You can't drink it but it's pretty clean. You look at the rest of the watershed and you go, 'Well, what about all the drainage off the farms? That's not going through a treatment plant. That's just going back out to the river and the river eventually comes to the bay."

"Should we be looking at where the best bang for the buck is? If it's cleaning up sewage even more, then maybe we should do that. Or is it controlling what runs off from the street, the lawn, the farms? That's the question we have right now."

"Ag runoff, that's probably the next frontier," he said.

Climate change, undoubtedly the highest profile environmental challenge facing policy makers these days, isn't expected to have a major impact at Stege.

As the level of the Bay rises, more saltwater could get into sewer lines in the district's lower lying area, or into the EBMUD plant, Humphrey said. "Saltwater is not good for biological systems."

If climate change causes heavier storms, wet weather overflows could increase.

Or if, as John Andrew expects, efforts by residents and businesses to use less water increase, driven by environmental considerations, Stege's sewer lines might suffer from too little water passing through them.

"Extra water keeps sewers clean," he said, by washing out debris and preventing buildup. At that point, efforts to reduce infiltration may even add to the problem—by keeping water out of the pipes.

Stege could deal with the problem by using recycled water to flush its pipes more often, he said.

Meanwhile, increased attention is being paid to medications and other chemicals, whose presence in the bay is suspected of causing fish populations to plummet.

"The egregious discharges that used to go on—cadmium and silver and everything would get dumped into the bay—is all gone because the agencies have adopted enormous industrial waste control programs," Cunningham said. "But because we live in this complex chemical environment, there are still issues about what's getting into the Bay with some of these more obscure toxins."

"Endocrine disruptors pass right through treatment," Humphrey said. "You take medication, you're passing it through in your urine."

"Some of those things really do affect the life (in the Bay)," he said. "Some bright person will figure out how to remove that, I guess."

CHAPTER 28

I'm really sold on special districts. I am.

In the spring of 2010, as Stege Sanitary approached its 100th year, it rewarded itself with a brand new administration building—on a new site a few hundred yards from its original site.

The old quarry, a rather desolate swatch of dirt surrounded by steep, sparsely vegetated hillsides when Stege arrived in 1959, had, since the opening of the ECology recycling center in 1972, gradually become one of the most popular spots in town. The recycling center attracted fans devoted not just to recycling but to a book exchange, free mulch, and the occasional Junk Art exhibit.

The site also accommodated the city's corporation yard.

For years managers of Stege, which sat at the rear of the site, thought that shifting their office to the front would make for more efficient use of the land. It would allow the city to close off a portion of Schmidt Lane, which dead-ended at the old quarry wall, and served no function other than as Stege's driveway.

The 50-year-old administration building, meanwhile, was suffering from poor heating, a floor that sloped so much chairs would roll towards one end, and lack of modern wiring.

But the land Stege hoped to build on belonged to the city. Humphrey negotiated a land swap with the city, Stege brought in VBN Architects (which two years later also redesigned the city's recycling center), and produced a 3,940-square-foot, LEED-certified building complete with a native garden.

Stege's old building became part of the city's corporation yard.

As Stege approached its centenary it had a lot to celebrate. Its age, for one thing. At 100, it was the oldest existing sanitary district in the county—tailed not that closely by West County Wastewater District, which formed in 1923.

Among all Contra Costa County's special districts—78 of them, fire and police districts, recreation districts, a mosquito district, a couple of cemetery districts, a streetlighting district, and a slew of reclamation districts created in the Delta to turn waterways and sloughs into agricultural land—Stege was fifth oldest. The oldest is Crockett-Carquinez Fire Protection District, 1898, followed by several reclamation districts, number 799 on Bethel Island, 1911,

On January 11, 2013, the Stege Sanitary District received the 2012 Collection System of the Year Award (0-249 Miles) from the California Water Environment Association (CWEA) San Francisco Bay Section. The CWEA award is designed to honor exceptional wastewater agencies based on excellent regulatory compliance, administrative procedures, maintenance programs, safety programs, training programs, emergency procedures, and significant accomplishments over the past year.


AED
DELL


STEGE SANITARY DISTRICT
7500

number 800 on the Byron Tract, 1909, and number 830, Jersey Island, 1911.[185]

Stege's advanced age, of course, had as much to do with surviving its suicide attempt some years back as with its actual birth.

Local Agency Formation Commissions are regional bodies created by the state in 1963 to, among other things, consolidate and rationalize the plethora of such one-duty agencies (currently, more than 3,400 statewide), which were often seen as inefficient money wasters.

But if Stege was seen as such in 1976, it no longer is today. Don West, who joined the Stege board in 1977 intending to ease it into the grave, changed his mind as he helped the district control stormwater from pouring through sewer lines.

"What's transpired," he told a reporter in 1994, "is a testament to the efficiency of single-purpose districts."

The El Cerrito Journal's headline for the story? "Successful sanitary district: sewers their only business."[186]

Stege is widely credited with getting the jump on other districts in its infilitration repairs because of its ability to act quickly on recommendations, to take chances with innovative methods, and to focus on one issue.

"I'm really sold on special districts. I am," Doug Humphrey said. "After working at a couple of them and working in a large city, they are a lot more focused. I think they're more efficient. I think they spend the money better."

Cities and counties that run sewers often have higher, more politically-favored priorities, like parks or police. Although sewer rates are supposed to "reflect the cost of service," Humphrey noted, it is easy for larger agencies to shift them to other functions, for example, by covering the city manager's time, or that of the personnel office.

"I might be a little prejudiced in this," director Al Miller said, "but I think it was an incredible stroke of luck to the ratepayers that the district still exists, that it was not allowed to dissolve."[187]

Miller, who considers Art Schroeder his mentor, said that Schroeder, who as a board member had backed dissolving the district, changed his mind. "He said that had he known how we could focus our attention and how much control we had… neither he nor Don were aware really of the advantage of a special district."

Even Jean Siri, who died in 2006, might have changed her mind about killing Stege, Miller said. "I do know that Jean became very enamored of Stege… She always had glowing words for Stege."

When she was on the Stege board, Miller said, Siri had special business cards made that read, "Stege Sanitary District: Where the Sewage Meets the Sea."

Small may be beautiful, but suggestions for consolidating the Bay Area's many sanitary agencies get bandied about regularly—including in discussions about how the East Bay sanitation agencies will meet the latest infiltration and inflow requirements. "It's not necessarily a bad idea," Delizo said. Consolidation could lead to uniform procedures and standards. But he doesn't see it happening anytime soon.

For years, Stege board members have tended to have backgrounds in engineering. "It was almost a technocracy, if you will at Stege," said John Andrew, a civil engineer who was on the board through the 1990s. "It worked well for us."

Beside Andrew, the board included Al Miller, an engineer formerly with the navy, Don West, an engineer who'd worked at the Chevron refinery in Richmond, Jay James, a nuclear engineer, and Beatrice O'Keefe, a virologist.

At board meetings, Andrew said, "We often got into technical details perhaps more than was needed," he said. "We acted more like a board of engineers than a board of directors.

The tradition is continuing. Besides Miller and O'Keefe, the current board includes Dwight Merrill, a chemist, Graham Brand, an electrical engineer, and Paul Gilbert-Snyder, an associate civil engineer for EBMUD.

Getting ready for Stege's 75th birthday celebration in 1988, Art Schroeder prepared a little talk that might work well for the 100th as well.

"We've come a long way from the time when the bilge flowed into the Bay to a time when we know we must guard the Bay as a national treasure," he said. "And, as you know from recent events, sometimes when we are cleaning up one end of the Bay the other gets fouled up again. But we must keep on trying."[188]

Opposite: Stege's new office building, clockwise from upper left: Architectural rendering; During contruction; Completed building outside; New customer service area inside completed building

STEGE SANITARY DISTRICT

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

1913-1916	Barber, George
1913-1914	Best, William
1913-1918	Davis, H.F.
1913-1919	Huber, William
1913-1917	Navellier, Emest
1915-1919	Rust, W.F.
1916-1916	Dunlay, Frank
1917-1919	Conlon, George
1917-1918	Wright, F.W.
1918-1921	Sandvick, John
1919-1921	Barber, George
1919-1920	Meyers, George
1919-1921	Guidice, A.
1919-1922	Gray, K.C.
1920-1922	Tousant, J.
1921-1923	Lutz, Fred
1921-1925	O'Connell, John
1921-1925	Rosana, Joe
1922-1923	Carrick, George
1922-1924	Van Fleet, H.
1923-1925	Facinni, Charles
1924-1928	Schwake, Charles
1924-1926	Wuelzer, Edward W.
1925-1926	Hinds, Clifford
1925-1929	Christensen, Elmer
1925-1948	Sandvick, John
1926-1934	Facinni, Charles
1926-1934	Soldavini, Charles
1928-1932	McDonald, French
1929-1931	Schwake, Charles
1931-1933	Hiat, E.
1932-1936	Locklin, W.
1933-1948	Christensen, Elmer
1934-1942	Kister, Donald
1934-1961	Weyand, Walter
1936-1937	McNabb, L.
1937-1938	Bartlett, Robert
1938-1957	Baxter, Alfred
1942-1950	Connors, George
1948-1975	Smith, Austin
1948-1975	Copeland, Robert
1950-1977	Snodgrass, Marion
1957-1985	Mahon, Charles
1961-1977	Barbachano, Ulysses
1975-1979	Siri, Jean
1975-1987	Valentino, Edward
1977-1990	Schroeder, Arthur
1977-1998	West, Donald
1979-1983	Donahue, Edwin
1983-2011	James, Jay
1985-	Miller, Alan
1987-	O'Keefe, Beatrice
1990-1991	Rosti, Mary
1991-1998	Andrew, John
1998-	Merrill, Dwight
1999-2006	Bruce, Douglas
2006-	Brand, Graham
2011-	Gilbert-Snyder, Paul

DISTRICT COUNSEL

1930-1932	Huggard, D.
1932-1935	Jacoby, Harold
1935-1947	Thompson, A.G.
1947-1976	Sturgis, Eugene
1977-1996	Brunsell, Robert
1996-2004	Esselstein, William
2004-2010	Riback, Michael
2011-	Reyes II, Benjamin

DISTRICT MANAGER

1957-1984	Baxter, Alfred
1984-1985	Kneip, Reese
1985-2000	Rugaard, Lawrence
2000-2011	Humphrey, Douglas
2011-	Delizo, Rex

Stege Sanitary District 2013 Board of Directors left to right: Dwight Merrill, Graham Brand, Beatrice O'Keefe, Alan Miller, Paul Gilbert-Snyder photo by Photo by Dale F. Mead

STEGE SANITARY DISTRICT HISTORICAL TIMELINE 1913-2013

One of the 28 historic-cultural pavers installed by the City of El Cerrito on San Pablo Avenue honors the first meeting of the Stege Sanitary District Board of Directors in May, 1913. The meeting took place at what was called Stege Junction, the corner of San Pablo and Potrero.

1913, May

Two hundred twenty-six voters approve creation of Stege Sanitary District and elect five commissioners and a sanitary assessor to run it. Top vote getter is William Huber, the district's leading proponent. The board's first meeting is May 28, 1913.

1913, September 27

Voters approve a bond sale by the district to pay for sewers, 202 for, nine opposed, three "illegally marked."

1913

Stege hands out a liquor license or two at virtually every meeting.

1914, May

Sewer construction gets underway. Outfalls dump raw sewage into San Francisco Bay, the practice of all sewage agencies at the time.

1915, July 22

The first sewer connection permit went to Mr. A. Renwitz.

1917, August

Voters approve incorporation of the city of El Cerrito in an effort led by some of the same people who formed Stege. Opposition from dairymen, quarries and others keeps large areas outside city borders, including Kensington and Bayview, which are served by Stege.

1920s

El Cerrito becomes a residential boom town, as small subdivisions begin filling the flatlands and lower hills. The city and Bayview also fill with gambling halls, speakeasies, and prostitution. Development proceeds in Kensington as well. Stege scurries to build sewers to accommodate development and creates assessment districts to finance the improvements.

1923

District reorganizes under California Sanitary District Act of 1923, which sets new rules and procedures.

1929

Major improvements to system. The two original outfalls are replaced and lengthened to carry "sewerage out farther into the Bay and to a place where sanitary conditions are more favorable."

1930

Stege's main is extended to Point Isabel, which now serves as the district's outfall into the Bay.

1931

Stege begins serving a small portion of Albany under contract, an arrangement that ends after World War II when Albany hooks into EBMUD'S system

1932, October

Stege resolution 27 approves sewer service to the El Cerrito Kennel Club, a dog racing track that becomes the biggest attraction in town until being shut down by state attorney general Earl Warren seven years later.

1935

Stege requires that barns and stables be clean and well ventilated, and

have gutters that connect to sanitary sewers.

1937

Stege moves its office to El Cerrito City Hall.

1938

Alfred Baxter first elected to Stege Board; will serve on board and as district manager until 1984.

1939

Stege installing sewers in hillside tracts, including Mira Vista, Arlington Estates and Richmond Junction Heights. Federal WPA funding helps.

1939, 1940

Rainstorms send storm water into sewers and sewage streets throughout the district. A "city wide mass meeting" is held and a "flood survey committee" formed.

1941

The Hyde report, a regional study sponsored by the East Bay Municipal Utility District, calls for treatment of sewage before dumping into San Francisco Bay.

1942, December

Stege approves plans to serve war worker trailer camp on Fairmount Avenue, site of the former dog track.

1943

Stege builds Meeker Interceptor Sewer in Richmond to handle sewage for war worker housing.

1944

EBMUD, whose job was providing water, takes on sewage treatment too by forming Special District No. 1. Goal is to build a regional treatment plant.

1946-1947

Stege considers options for treating its sewage before releasing it into the bay: consolidating with other agencies, building its own plant, or sending its effluent to EBMUD. The EBMUD plan is deemed best.

1946

Stege plans major improvements to its system because of population growth during World War II and anticipated growth.

1947

State public health officials forbid raw sewage discharges into San Francisco Bay, a ruling that had been expected since the start of World War II.

1947, 1948

EBMUD rejects Stege's request to join Special District No. 1 because of finances and timing. A second request that EBMUD serve both El Cerrito and Richmond as Special District No. 2 is also rejected.

1948

Stege buys a site on Point Isabel to build a wastewater treatment plant.

1948

Congress passes the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1948 to provide for regulation and cleanup in "navigable waters."

1955

Primary treatment plant at Point Isabel completed.

1957

Baxter resigns from board to take job as district manager-secretary.

1959

Stege builds its own office and yard in the former Hutchinson quarry. Its architect U.S. Barbachano soon joins Stege board.

1960s

Significant improvements to system, including pumping station and larger mains.

1962

Stege declines to provide service to a proposed commercial and residential development in Wildcat Canyon east of Kensington. Area later becomes regional park.

1965, Jan. 23

William Huber dies at age 92.

1966-1967

Stege plans to provide secondary treatment at its Point Isabel plant.

1969

Stege and EBMUD reach agreement on adding Stege to Special District

No. 1, which means Stege will no longer treat its waste and will not need to reconstruct its plant.

1970

Stege joins Special District No. 1.

1972

Stege system connects to EBMUD's shoreline interceptor service; its sewage is now treated by EBMUD's Bay Bridge plant and the Point Isabel plant operates as a wet weather facility only.

1975, November

Jean Siri is elected to Stege board vowing to dissolve the district, arguing that it was no longer needed.

1976, November

Stege board votes unanimously to dissolve as an independent and merge with EBMUD.

1977, 1978

When EBMUD refuses to absorb the district, Stege and El Cerrito reach agreement to merge.

1979, June 5

Kensington voters kill the Stege-El Cerrito merger at the ballot box, turning out in greater numbers than voters in El Cerrito and consistently voting no.

1980

Stege joins with EBMUD and six East Bay cities on a regional Infiltration and Inflow study on preventing storm water from flooding sewer systems and polluting the bay.

1981

Stege eliminates most of its staff, stops performing its own maintenance, and contracts with West Contra Costa Sanitary District for services.

1982

After state Proposition 13 cuts the ability to raise funds through property taxes, Stege institutes sewer user charges.

1985

Larry Rugaard hired as general manager.

1985

Stege ends its contract with West Contra Costa Sanitary in a disagreement over its cost; rehires a staff.

1985

Start of comprehensive sewer improvement program to carry our recommendations of the Infiltration and Inflow study.

1987, August 15

Al Baxter dies at age 77.

1988

Stege celebrated its 75th anniversary.

1989

Stege named "collection system of the year" by the California Water Pollution Association for its success in preventing infiltration and inflow.

1994

Dwight Merrill seeks a seat on the Stege board, producing the first contested election in 17 years. The incumbents win, but when an opening comes up later, Merrill is appointed.

1990s

Stege develops an innovative system for preventive maintenance using computers, robotic cameras, and geographic information systems.

2000

Doug Humphrey becomes Stege's general manager. He improves operations and greatly reduces overflows.

2005

Stege, along with EBMUD and the other six Special District No 1. agencies, are informed by the EPA that existing treatment plants no longer meet federal requirements. Studies commence to find a solution.

2010

Stege opens a new office and an improved yard on a better site at the former quarry.

2011

Rex Delizo, an engineer with the district since 1987, becomes general manager.

2012

The Stege Sanitary District receives the 2012 Collection System of the Year Award (0-249 Miles) from the California Water Environment Association (CWEA) San Francisco Bay Section

2013

Stege, the oldest existing sanitary district in the county, celebrates its centenary.

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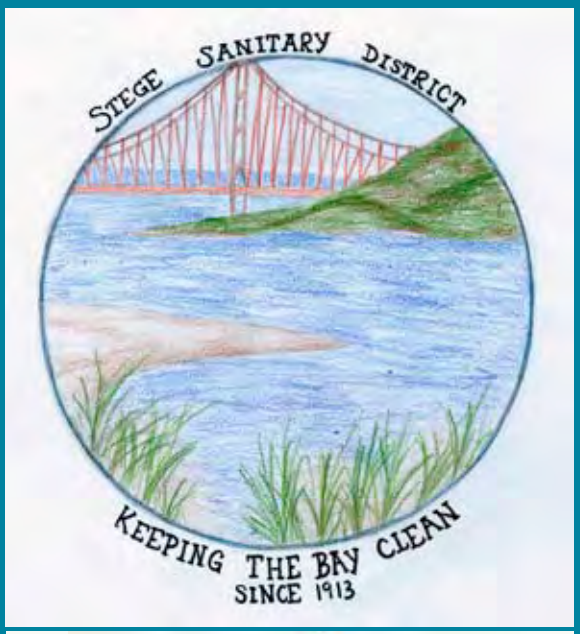

These posters were created as part of a community project by El Cerrito High School students to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the May 1913 founding of the Stege Sanitary District. Student artists are, clockwise from upper left: Svea Johnson (Logo Prize), Julia Mason (Poster Prize), Ellen Fabini (Artistic Mention), and Kyoko Matsuno (Artistic Mention).

Cover photos counterclockwise from left: A flyer from the El Cerrito Land and Improvement Company extolling the virtues of El Cerrito, including its network of sewers; Stege flushing and rodding trucks from the 1920s; A 1934 program for the El Cerrito Kennel Club, which had 11 races daily; Al Baxter first won election to the Stege Board in 1938—and remained with the district the rest of his life; Workers tie steel during the May 1952 construction of the Point Isabel wastewater treatment plant; "Paid in Full," the district bragged in 1954 after completing its plant without taking on debt; Modern pumps at the EBMUD Point Isabel wet weather treatment plant; Stege collection system workers, Fred Bondoc, John Gerletti and Quincy McCall with the District's new rodder in 2002.
Center: In 1964, considering its options for providing secondary treatment, Stege studied the tides near its Point Isabel plant. Stege workers George Scott and Fred Lowell took to the Bay to find out.

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