

Calistoga Tribune

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Council closes door on water protests

■ Public forum on rate increases Jan. 10, with final decision on Jan. 16

By Kim Beltran
Tribune Editor

The Calistoga City Council did not pass a set of recommended water and sewer rate increases on Tuesday night.

It did, however, shut the door on written protests from residents – needed to block the rate increases – by officially closing the public hearing on the matter.

“I feel that by not closing this public hearing tonight I would be violating my fiduciary responsibility

to this city because of the real potential for the success of a protest which would prohibit this council from taking any action as it relates to an increase of sewer and water rates,” said vice mayor Michael Dunsford, whose motion to close the public hearing was later approved on a 3-2 vote. Council members Gary Kraus and Irais Lopez-Ortega sided with Dunsford. Mayor Chris Canning and councilman Jim Barnes, who favored keeping the public comment period open, dissented.

The action taken by the council means any hope residents had of stopping the rate increases is gone. Under state law, if 50.1 percent of a municipality's water customers



A standing-room-only crowd awaits the start of Tuesday night's City Council meeting and a public hearing on raising residential and commercial water and sewer rates.

PHOTO BY KIM BELTRAN

submit written letters protesting rate hikes, the municipality is barred from increasing the rates.

At the time of Tuesday night's meeting, city clerk Kathy Flanson had on hand 250 valid protest letters,

she said. By the end of the meeting she had received another 258 protest letters that would need to be verified as having come from legitimate city water customers.

Even if all 258 letters submitted on Tuesday were deemed valid, with 1,688 water customers another 337 protest letters would have been

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Forni-Brown-Welsh proprietors say it's time for retirement

By Kim Beltran
Tribune Editor

After decades of providing top-notch organic produce to high-end markets and elite chefs around the world, Lynn Brown, Peter Forni and Barney Welsh are hanging up their commercial gardening gloves.

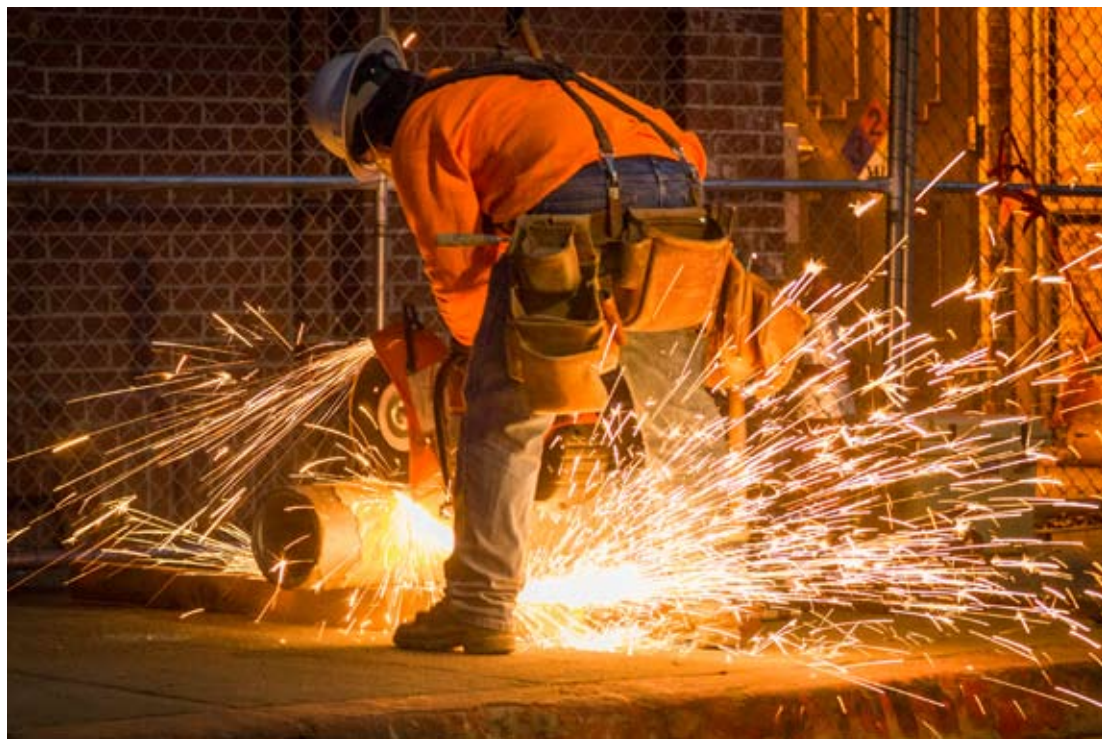
Welsh, co-owner of Calistoga's Forni-Brown-Welsh Gardens, confirmed Wednesday that the trio is headed into retirement.

“Our last delivery to restaurants was last Friday,” Welsh told the Tribune. “It's kind of poetic that one of the last restaurants we delivered to that day – Auberger – is one of the first ones we began delivering to when we started.”

The unassuming Pine Street farm that Welsh has owned and lived on for the last 40 years produces some of the most sought-after heritage vegetables and herbs in the country, if not the world.

Greens from the farm were once specifically requested for and flown same-day to a state dinner in Minneapolis for then-President Ronald Reagan and then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

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PHOTOS BY CLARK JAMES MISHLER

Bridge work continues

Above, a construction worker on the Lincoln Avenue bridge replacement project shoots sparks into the night air as he cuts a steel pipe. Right, an aerial view of the work on the new bridge to date. While this project is slated to continue through the year, a second bridge replacement project on Berry Street is scheduled to wrap up by the end of the month.



PHOTO BY PAT HAMPTON

Vermeil Clinic open through month's end

■ Dr. Jeannette Williams opening new office down street on Washington

By Kim Beltran
Tribune Editor

Whether the Vermeil Clinic on Washington Street will continue to be used as a medical facility is unknown but its doctor, Jeannette Williams, will remain there through the end of the month.

Beginning in February, Williams will be in her new practice and in a new office just down the street from the Vermeil Clinic in contractor Dan Farris' business complex.

In November, a spokesman for Ole Health said the organization was being “gifted” the Vermeil Clinic by Adventist Health, which also owns St. Helena Hospital. Ole Health currently operates a federally-qualified, non-profit community clinic

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CA bill would bar utilities from passing liability costs to customers

By Kim Beltran
Tribune Editor

A bill introduced in the California Senate this week would prevent electric utilities from passing costs for negligent practices to customers by raising rates.

A group of state senators, including Jerry Hill and Calistoga representative Bill Dodd, on Wednesday introduced SB 819, which they said in a written statement was “prompted by utilities' ongoing efforts to recover costs resulting from

long-past wildfires by seeking permission to increase rates, even if found at fault in the fires.”

The much-criticized practice came under sharp scrutiny as one such effort, by a San Diego utility, came up for review by the California Public Utilities Commission as wildfires raged last fall in Northern California's Wine Country, the statement said. While the cause of those fires is still being investigated, several legislators wanted to ensure that the electric utilities serving California can not recover the

costs that result from the utilities' negligent practices by raising rates on its customers.

“The practice is an outrage and it's time to stop allowing utilities to push the burden of their negligence onto the backs of customers,” said Hill, a Democrat from San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. “Victims of devastating fires and other tragedies, and ratepayers in general, should not be forced to pay for the mistakes made by utilities.”

Pacific Gas & Electric Co., which is

facing multiple lawsuits from fire victims claiming it did not properly maintain its power lines by trimming tree limbs away, issued a statement Wednesday in response to the proposed legislation.

“While there has been no determination on the causes of the Northern California wildfires that took place in October, it is clear that California needs much broader reforms that recognize the

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