

Bill McEwen: Drumbeat (of rain? we hope!) continues – drought is top story of 2015

By Bill
McEwen

Yes, it has been raining lately and this El Niño is shaping up as the real deal.

And, yes, I'd like to give you something sexy or something really deep as alternative.

Fresno Fire Capt. Pete Dern triumphantly raises his hand to wave to supporters before leaving Community Regional Medical Center for home on Sept. 9, 2015. JOHN WALKER jwalker@fresnobee.com

But the top Fresno story of 2015, among many important stories, was the [boring old drought](#).

Sure, you're tired of hearing about it. You'd like pack its suitcase and watch the drought fly off in Eldon Musk's SpaceX rocket, never to be heard from again.



Here's the big thing about the fourth year of the drought: It affected everyone but a few rich profligate water wasters in Southern California whose names are still being protected by their gutless water districts.

[Our lawns went brown](#). We paid more for water. We adopted water-saving measures. We pointed fingers and had fingers pointed back at us. We debated the sanity of planting more and more water-thirsty almond trees. We also debated how much water should go to agriculture – the backbone of the San Joaquin Valley economy – and how much should go for urban needs and the environment.

The continuing drought forced us all to learn a whole lot more about water. It even forced City Hall to follow its own watering rules. No longer could Fresno officials practice “do as we say, not as we do.” Not in the age of social media. One picture of a gushing city park sprinkler posted on Twitter sent repair crews into action faster than a newspaper editorial ever could.

The big takeaway for Fresno on the drought is that residents and public officials pretty much handled it right. Homeowners stopped thinking that their landscape should resemble a traditional British garden. The Fresno City Council overcame its extreme distaste for raising rates and approved Mayor Ashley Swearengin's \$429 million upgrade of our crumbling and inadequate water system. With its vote, the council positioned Fresno to diversify and expand its economy while meeting future needs for clean, safe drinking water.

Summerset Village apartment crisis

I suppose we should thank Chris Henry for being a slumlord and the residents of his 220-unit apartment complex for their patience. Had Henry been even a little attentive, we wouldn't have seen City Hall's code-enforcement effort exposed for the sham it was.

Once PG&E turned off the gas Nov. 13 to prevent a potential explosion caused by leaking pipes and residents were forced to go without heat, cooked meals and hot showers, city officials had no choice but to confront the reality of a deplorable situation that they helped create.

City Manager Bruce Rudd read the riot act to Henry, a coastal restaurateur and Kern County oil well owner who wilted under the barrage of statewide negative publicity, and quickly got Henry's agreement to make the fixes at [Summerset Village](#).

Rudd did something else, too. He took ownership of the obviously lax attempt to make slumlords toe the line. And when a Dec. 13 fire killed five squatters at an abandoned home, Rudd added more resources to his previously announced plan to make things better for renters and the neighborhoods where slumlords do their dirty work.

Fresno Unified construction contract controversy

When the 5th District Court of Appeal ruled in June that the \$37 million contract given to Harris Construction to build Rutherford B. Gaston Middle School was not a genuine "[lease-leaseback](#)" agreement, the repercussions spread throughout California.

The Legislature scrambled to protect leaseback contractors who potentially face having to return hundreds of millions of dollars to school districts, but the bid died – likely because of media attention on this turkey of a bill.

Education and construction attorneys advised school districts to stop using leaseback and return to competitive bidding for picking general contractors.

And in Fresno, the appellate court's decision finally brought traction to a story first reported by The Bee in 2012.

Suddenly, Fresno Unified Superintendent Michael Hanson and district trustees found themselves under intense scrutiny – scrutiny that included a federal subpoena to turn over all documents involving no-bid leaseback construction contracts handed to the Harris Construction and Bush Construction companies.

Stay tuned in 2016 for more developments in a [story that introduced thousands of Fresnans to the app Cyber Dust](#).

Pete Dern inspires us all

Raise your hand if you saw the horrifying video of Fresno Fire Capt. Pete Dern falling through the roof of a house and into a ball of flames on March 29.

Now keep your hands up if you have followed his recovery from second- and third-degree burns to 70 percent of his body.

What happened to Pete Dern was a tragedy. No one should have to endure such searing pain and debilitating injuries.

But his story reminded us, again, of the life-saving work performed at Community Medical Center's Leon S. Peters Burn Center. And it provided residents with the opportunity to rally in support of Dern, a 25-year veteran of the department, and his fellow firefighters.

Understand: Dern, a 1983 San Joaquin Memorial High School graduate and native Fresnan, was no ordinary guy. He had graduated first in his class at the fire academy. He flew helicopters for the Army National Guard. He was a leader who mentored many firefighters.

When he met the public July 10 for the first time since being burned, he said simply, "[Hi, I'm Pete Dern](#)." Then he thanked his doctors, his family, fellow firefighters and the public.

This support included more than \$186,000 raised by children collecting dimes, bands playing benefit concerts, motorcycle clubs holding rides and people donating via the crowd-sourcing website [YouCaring.com](#).

Every little bit helped. Dern said that the community's thoughts and prayers, mattered, too: "I can feel the support."

We all could use a little more of what fuels Joe Castro

There's no single thing that [Fresno State President Joseph Castro](#) did to qualify for this list. He and his wife, Mary, simply kept doing what they've done since he succeeded John Welty in spring 2013.

The Castros seemingly are everywhere – selling kids up and down the Valley on the value of education and selling potential donors on Fresno State's ability to transform the region.

We are already seeing the positive effects of Castro's leadership. Graduation rates are up. Students are graduating more quickly. Both students and faculty are embracing his quest to bring education into the digital age. He also is pushing what the Valley economy desperately needs: more graduates in science, technology, engineering, agriculture and math, or what he calls "STEAM."

When Castro sees a problem – one example: students going hungry – he attacks it, checks the results and adjusts, as he did with the university's Food Security Initiative.

Most of all, Castro is convincing people to abandon the "good enough for the Valley" mentality and strive for greatness. As he says, "Be bold!"

Deputy chief allegedly dealing drugs and nobody at the cop shop knows it?

After Fresno police Deputy Chief Keith Foster was among six people arrested March 26 on federal drug charges, including conspiracy to distribute oxycodone, heroin and marijuana, the heat was on Chief Jerry Dyer.

Foster, after all, was Dyer's longtime friend and loyal colleague and presumed to be by many the police chief in waiting. Given that police officers are known to be highly suspicious and world-class gossips, how could Dyer not know what was going on under his very nose, reporters and the public wanted to know.

That question proved to be a momentary sidebar to Foster's arrest. The following day, Dyer said that federal authorities told him that there was no way he could have known what Foster allegedly was doing.

This aspect of the story evaporated. But it could return if [Foster, who has pleaded not guilty](#), fights the charges at trial

High-speed rail construction begins

California's controversial \$66 billion [high-speed rail project](#) chugs along and is taking shape even while many residents voice opposition based on their beliefs that it will prove to be a money-losing boondoggle.

The project gobbled up buildings and acreage throughout Fresno and on June 16 heavy construction work formally commenced in a dusty field next to a freight railroad line in Madera. Workers there are building the foundation of a 1,600-foot elevated bridge over the Fresno River, Highway 145 and Raymond Road.

The construction "is the first visual that people can start seeing us building up," Diana Gomez, Central Valley regional director for the California High-Speed Rail Authority, told The Bee's Tim Sheehan.

That visual energized high-speed rail supporters and seemed to equally inspire opponents who continue to call for a "do-over" of the 2008 vote that authorized selling \$9.9 billion in bonds to link Northern and Southern California via a bullet-train system.

I won't rehash the pros and cons of building the system. But the concept of do-over votes is fascinating. Can you imagine the added chaos they would inject into California's already complicated politics?

We are all Amrik Singh Bal

After [Amrik Singh Bal, a 68-year-old farm laborer, was attacked and beaten](#) by two young thugs while he was waiting for a ride to work the morning after Christmas, something remarkable happened.

Fresnans, representing a multitude of religions and ethnic groups, joined hand-in-hand with the Sikh community to express their outrage at a hate crime apparently was set into motion by Bal's wearing of a turban — a simple act of religious devotion.

I use the word “remarkable” to describe our city's reaction because it comes against the backdrop of a presidential election campaign in which Donald Trump's recipe for making America Great Again includes fear-mongering and making all Muslims scapegoats for terrorism.

Alas, The Donald knows what he knows and is more interested in poll numbers and fueling the rage of angry people than in advocating for humanity's highest values.

But here in Fresno, a city built and inhabited by many waves of immigrants, most of us know that it's best to judge the person and not paint with a broad brush. When those two punks attacked Bal, they attacked each and every one of us who values religious freedom and the idea that America is better because it is a Melting Pot.

Praise the heavens, decades-long Fulton Mall debate might be over

After the Fresno City Council awarded a \$22.4 million contract Dec. 3 [to tear out the Fulton Mall](#), Mayor Swearingin took a picture of the 6-1 vote posted on the video screen above the dais, and pronounced that the debate was over.

Even though the contract amount came in higher than planned, Swearingin said that she and her staff would trim the costs to \$20 million – the amount budgeted for the project.

Good enough, when the mayor puts her mind to something, she almost always succeeds. But there is the matter of lawsuits filed by folks who believe the mall is a treasure. Those should be decided fairly soon. If they are, the mayor says that the groundbreaking could be in February.

Confession: I long have backed the reconversion of Fulton to a street – a meandering street with wide sidewalks for walkers and the proper display of the mall's valuable artwork.

But, of late, I have wondered, is Fresno actually late on this trend of bulldozing outdoor pedestrian malls built in the 1960s and 1970s? I mean, is it possible that malls are just a year or two from becoming the next big thing again?

I don't have the answers. Perhaps I just have a horrible case of Fulton Mall Debate Confusion Syndrome.

I've been walking all day and I can't find a park in south Fresno

Politics is rarely fair, as Swearingin can attest. City Hall for years had ignored southeast Fresno, particularly when it comes to building parks and providing other recreational opportunities.

But she was at the helm when [parks scarcity on the south side of the city – and Fresno's lack of parks in general – gained traction](#) with community activists and the public at large in 2015.

The situation wasn't Swearingin's fault. Nor was there much money to invest in parks. Fresno had been facing bankruptcy. City Hall had cut its workforce and services dramatically. In the face of the loud call for more parks, she agreed that Fresno needed more and pointed to modest increases in parks and recreation funding, but said there wasn't the money to do more. Public safety, she said, had to be the top priority.

An agreement apparently has been forged between City Hall and Fresno Unified to increase opportunities for residents to use schools green space. We'll see if that truly comes to pass.

Meanwhile, the mayor, the city council and the 2016 mayoral candidates should be on notice: This issue isn't going away.

Who do you stand for?

Demands that President Barack Obama fulfill his campaign promise to recognize the Armenian genocide escalated nationally and in Fresno days before April 24 – [the 100th anniversary of the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians carried out by the Ottoman Empire](#).

Like President George W. Bush before him, Obama declined to call the slaughter by the name it deserves out of fear of agitating Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

But Pope Francis called it what it was: “the first genocide of the 20th century.”

And people of Armenian descent from throughout the Valley told their stories of anguish, the loss of cherished loved ones and the relatives they never got to meet on The Bee's opinion pages.

We published the photos of descendants of genocide victims (and survivors) and their statements about whom they stood for 100 years later.

“I stand for my grandparents Tottos and Irmav Babagian and my father's two brothers and one sister, who were massacred during the genocide. My father, Paul Boghos, was a young boy at the time, hid from the invasion, and lived to tell us about it,” wrote Thomas Paul Babagian of Visalia, who appeared in a photograph with his daughter Rebecca Crawford.

Someday, we'll elect a president who has the courage to emulate Pope Francis. And we'll all be better for it.