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A COUNTY COUNCIL



Chmelik



Delauter



Shreve



Otis



Donald



Fitzwater



Keegan-Ayer

After second year, board remains tense

By **DANIELLE E. GAINES**
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At Winchester Hall, Frederick County Council members have fallen into a pattern. The council comments portion of their meetings, since the council took office in December 2014, has become a forum for grievances of the Republican members, who are now effectively in the council's minority.

The comment portion, which occurs at the end of council meetings, often goes like it did on Nov. 1: The sun has gone down. Fewer than a half-dozen

residents remain in the audience in the council's chamber.

Councilman Kirby Delauter (R) speaks.

Councilman Billy Shreve (R) leans back, smiling and laughing, while the rest of the council is visibly less entertained.

The third Republican on the council, Tony Chmelik, backs his chair away from the dais and stares downward.

Democrat Jerry Donald, seated directly next to Delauter, sits silently, chin on his hand.

(See **COUNCIL A6**)



We really haven't evolved. We really are no different than the first day we took office. We are still dysfunctional.

BILLY SHREVE, councilman



There are seven very strong personalities that were elected. Some of us have been able to move beyond the campaign, and some of us have not entirely.

M. C. KEEGAN-AYER, councilwoman

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Council

(Continued from A1)

Council President Bud Otis, who left the Republican party early in his second year on the council, looks downward and reclines back.

Council Vice President M.C. Keegan-Ayer (D) with her hand across her pursed lips, shakes her head slightly from side to side.

Jessica Fitzwater (D) looks up information on her phone, then stops to also rest her chin on her hand.

Their postures remain largely the same for the rest of Delauter's comments.

In recent weeks, Democratic council members have taken to correcting what they characterize as misstatements by Shreve and Delauter before the meeting wraps up.

These kinds of tensions on the council have punctuated the lawmakers' two-year tenure.

The two sides don't even agree on what has been accomplished under charter government.

Keegan-Ayer is working with other members to draft a list of accomplishments to cap off the council's second full year in office.

Donald readily rattled off a list of successes in a recent interview:

- The property tax rate is unchanged;
- The county's bond rating has gone up;
- The county ethics law has been reformed;
- County government once again owns the Citizens Care and Rehabilitation Center and Montevue Assisted Living facilities for low-income seniors;
- There are more county sheriff's deputies and firefighters.

Donald also points to his bills to increase notifications for zoning changes and expand the natural buffer areas along water bodies in the county, along with 12 other bills this year from his Democratic colleagues, Otis, the county sheriff and the county executive.

"I think things are going quite well. Most of us on the council try to come in regularly to the office, do our work, research legislation, stuff like that. I think our biggest accomplishments are doing things we said we'd do during the campaign," Donald said.

Shreve bluntly disagreed. "We've been ineffective."

"We've done nothing," Shreve said in an interview.

He calls charter government "the worst form of government anyone could ever have and it should be abolished."

He and other Republican members have lamented a lack of constituent contact under charter government, an incomplete budget and legal staff to independently advise council members on county decision-making, and the rigidity with which charter government has been implemented, including the structure of council meetings and a council role that they see as too narrowly focused.

Sticking points

Tensions under charter government are frequently revealed in council meetings.

During an October meeting, Donald confronted Delauter — who formerly served on the Board of County Commissioners — about his apparent change of heart on a memorandum of understanding relating to the proposed downtown hotel and conference center project.

Delauter said the project changed considerably since he voted in support of the general plan in 2014.

"The only thing that changed was the government," Donald said, as the men talked over one another.

Keegan-Ayer believes animosity lingers from the council and county executive campaigns two years ago, which she thinks is unfortunate.

She said it's discouraging that good bills from County Executive Jan Gardner, who Keegan-Ayer supports, seem to face an uphill battle with some council members, not on their merits, but just because the executive, a Democrat, proposed them.

"There are seven very strong personalities that were elected. Some of us have been able to move beyond the campaign, and some of us have not entirely," Keegan-Ayer said.

One sticking point has been on issues related to constituent complaints — handled under charter government as more of an administrative function for

county government employees to work on, rather than a legislative matter for council members to address.

"We're not a constituency service," Otis said.

However, Shreve and Delauter have suggested, over the past year, that the council conduct meetings and workshops on various topics rooted in constituent concerns, most of which never received the necessary level of support from fellow council members to be scheduled.

Instead, the council has set in place a process to move questions from county residents through the council's offices and on to Gardner's chief administrative officer.

Shreve has derided the process as time-consuming and costly. Otis defended it as orderly and necessary with multiple branches of government.

The council's chief of staff, Ragen Cherney, keeps a grid on his computer to track every request for information sent through the council, when the council gets a response and how long it took. That will help council members hold the county executive accountable, if necessary, in the future, Otis said.

"It will work, if you chose to work [with] it ...," he said. "I've done it. I've gotten my answer in a matter of three or four days."

Keegan-Ayer said that when the council first took office, there were no guidelines for how to divide the branches of government or how to move forward on certain issues.

"I think initially we were almost a boat without a rudder ...," she said. "It took us a while to shake that out. ... Some members are still struggling."

Shreve said he still believes that staffing levels for the council are not adequate.

"I think our structure is not perfect and our staffing levels are not what they should be."

He thinks a percentage of the county budget should help fund the council's offices.

"We really haven't evolved. We really are no different than the first day we took office. We are still dysfunctional," he said.

Chmelik, who often attempts to craft compromise solutions between council members during meetings, said he has also come to be disappointed in the lack of hiring of separate staff for council members.

An advocate of small government, Chmelik used to be against the hiring of a budget analyst for the council, but thinks, more and more, that the position might be necessary.

Otis said more changes may be necessary in the future, but long-term shifts in the government shouldn't be made rashly.

"I think that we did the right thing," Otis said. "We didn't walk in and start hiring people left and right. We moved carefully. I think we have good staff in place. I think it's working. I think we're being careful with the people's money."

Possible change ahead

At the council's first meeting in December, under charter rules, it must hold a biennial election of officers.

It's not clear, based on interviews with council members, what will happen at the meeting, scheduled for Tuesday.

Keegan-Ayer said she had "no idea" what may happen at the meeting.

Shreve said he would appreciate a change of leadership, but isn't certain whether Democratic members would shift their support away from Otis, who often votes with those lawmakers as a bloc. Otis notably changed his voter registration earlier this year to "unaffiliated," after he said the Frederick County Republican party had become too extreme.

Chmelik said a change of leadership on the council could change the dynamic of charter government, which he would support.

Chmelik complained that the weekly meetings between Otis, Keegan-Ayer and Gardner aren't fully reported back to other members of the council. Still, he's not sure what might happen Tuesday.

"I firmly believe that the voters of this county elected Republicans to be a check and balance to Jan Gardner and the council leadership should be a Republican," Chmelik said.

Otis also would not speculate what might happen with the council's leadership.

"I'm not presumptive in my thinking on this. ... Let's wait until we have the election," he said.

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Contribution questions permeate hotel project

By **DANIELLE E. GAINES**
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ANNAPOLIS — Frederick County state lawmakers plan to meet twice next week to discuss a proposed downtown Frederick hotel, as the legislature's bill filing deadline nears and tensions are increasing.

A crowd turned out in Annapolis on Friday morning for a meeting and possible vote on whether to pursue a bill to grant \$17.8 million in bond funding from the Maryland Stadium



COVERING
THE
CAPITOL

Authority to help finance the proposed downtown hotel and convention center project. But a final bill hadn't been drafted, and lawmakers said they still have questions.

The delegation plans to meet Wednesday to hear from an economist and other experts about financing for the project. A vote could take place next Friday.

About \$44 million of the cost of the \$82.47 million project will be paid by the hotel's developer, Plamondon Hospitality Partners. The rest would be a combination of city, county and state funding, according to a memorandum of understanding signed by the city of

(See **HOTEL A7**)

Council asks delegation to withdraw tax cap bill

By **DANIELLE E. GAINES**
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ANNAPOLIS — Four members of the Frederick County Council sent a letter to the Frederick County General Assembly delegation Thursday, expressing "grave dissatisfaction" with the lawmakers' vote last week to support a hotel tax cap.

All five Republicans — Sen. Michael Hough and Delegates Kathy Afzali, Barrie S. Ciliberti, William Folden and David E. Vogt III — voted to support a bill introduced by Hough which would cap

the hotel tax at 3 percent in Frederick County.

The delegation's three Democrats — Sen. Ron Young, and Delegates Carol L. Krimm and Karen Lewis Young — voted to keep the state law as currently written, which allows the tax to be set between 3 and 5 percent by the Frederick County Council.

The council's letter — signed by President Bud Otis (R), Vice President M.C. Keegan-Ayer (D), Jerry Donald (D) and

(See **TAX A7**)

Hotel

(Continued from A1)

Frederick.

The plan contemplates \$14.8 million in bond funding from the Stadium Authority.

However, the Stadium Authority said the project would be sustainable with up to \$17.8 million in financing, and suggested the bill could be crafted to that amount to create financial wiggle room if the project moves forward.

All public financing is projected to be paid back by new tax revenue generated by the project.

Whether to support the stadium bill — the largest chunk of public financing, which supporters say is necessary for the project — has become a debate centering on when public financing promotes a public good and when public financing becomes direct competition to private enterprise.

Randy Cohen, owner of the FSK Holiday Inn and the associated 5400 Holiday Drive LLC, has hired Annapolis powerhouse lobbyist Bruce Bereano to represent his interests in the downtown hotel debate.

Another lobbyist, Greenville Consulting Group, is promoting the downtown hotel among lawmakers and lists the Frederick County Chamber of Commerce as a client.

Plamondon does not list an official lobbyist, according to the latest State Ethics Commission list of registered lobbyists.

Pointed references to whether donations related to the hotel project can influence a delegation vote have come up in Annapolis this week.

Financial motivations

On Thursday, Sen. Ron Young, D-District 3, upset other delegation members during a bill hearing for his unrelated Real-Time Transparency Act of 2016 — a campaign finance reform proposal requiring that political committees report contributions of \$1,000 or higher within 48 hours during an election year.

"Actually, in a way, I'm sorry I didn't make this for all four years," Young said at the hearing. "[Because] we have a situation at home right now where some members are opposing a project, and they all just happened to get very heavy contributions from the people opposing it and they've changed their positions."

Young confirmed Friday he was referring to donations by Randy Cohen, who opposes the downtown project. However, the delegation has not taken any votes on the project.

A search of Maryland and federal campaign finance databases shows that Cohen, Bereano and Cohen's company gave \$9,997 to Republican members of the Frederick County delegation since June. Six donations were at least \$1,000.

Young's comments weren't well received by others in the delegation.

"Senator Young has no idea how I'm voting because I have no idea how I'm voting," Del. William Folden, R-District 3B, said Friday.

Others said Young's remarks violated general decorum and respect in Annapolis.

"It is against the spirit of this body and a disservice to ever challenge somebody's motivation for a vote," said Sen. Michael Hough, R-District 4. "I have a good personal relationship with Senator Young, but I think on this one, he shouldn't have said that."

Hough received \$2,000 from Cohen-related donors, and \$1,500 from Greenville, none of which will influence his decision, he said.

Young's comments came as a blog post by MacRo Commercial Real Estate owner Rocky Mackintosh analyzing campaign donations was circulating. The post questioned if Republican delegation members were being influenced by donations connected to Cohen. In the post, those donations were compared to individual donations by Peter and Jim Plamondon, but not to other entities supporting the downtown hotel project.

However, campaign finance records show that Greenville and other organizations that support the downtown project have also made donations, including to Young, but in smaller denominations.

Young received \$787.50 in

donations this past year between the Plamondons, a law firm that works for the company, and Greenville.

Other donations were received from supporters of the project, including some who wrote letters of support to lawmakers in Annapolis, but who don't have apparent direct ties to the project.

Delegate Karen Lewis Young, D-District 3A, received \$437.50 from Peter and Jim Plamondon and the law firm. She said the attorney who made the donations, David Severn, is a long-time family friend. Donations from the Plamondons went to the Youngs because they purchased tickets to a pre-session breakfast.

Mackintosh said if the campaign donation comparisons in his post were incomplete, it was inadvertent. However, he said he wanted to add his voice to the growing debate because he thinks the project is good for downtown Frederick and the county.

Several delegation members said they didn't know precisely how much money they've received from opponents or proponents of the downtown hotel. All said campaign donations would never influence a vote. Most said they didn't think their colleagues could be influenced by donations either.

"I'm not going to judge them. I am judging what I think Mr. Cohen was trying to do," Ron Young said.

Young said donations from Plamondon Hospitality Partners or other groups associated with the downtown project couldn't sway his vote, because he has supported the downtown hotel project for many years.

Delegate Barrie S. Cilliberti, R-District 4, said he won't be influenced by a Cohen donation because he also already made up his mind before a check was accepted by a new campaign treasurer.

"My decision was way, way before anyone contributed to me," Cilliberti said. "There's no way in the world these people are going to be influenced by a check for a thousand bucks, or whatever it is."

Delegate David E. Vogt III, R-District 4, has received the most combined money in the past year from groups clearly related to the hotel debate. He easily rattled them off Friday: \$1,797 from Randy Cohen, which included an in-kind donation for his congressional campaign kick-off; \$500 to his delegate account from the FSK Holiday Inn; and \$250 each from Jim and Peter Plamondon.

"I am not bought by anybody. Period," Vogt said Friday. "Anybody who suggests such is insulting."

Vogt said he may have received more donations because he's been most open to hearing from both sides. He and Folden said they are undecided and looking forward to the discussion by the economist on Wednesday.

Folden received \$1,700 from Cohen-related donors.

Delegate Kathy Alzali, R-District 4, received \$1,500 from Cohen and \$250 from Greenville. She said it's not surprising for a pro-business lawmaker to get money from private businesses.

Delegate Carol Krimm, D-District 3A, didn't accept any individual contributions during the last reporting cycle of Jan. 15, 2015, to Jan. 13, 2016.

The proposed hotel would be on the property at 200 and 212 E. Patrick St., which is currently owned by a business entity formed by members of the Randall family. The Randall family also owns the parent company of *The Frederick News-Post*.

Follow Danielle E. Gaines on Twitter: @daniellegaines.

Tax

(Continued from A1)

Jessica Fitzwater (D) — expressed regret that the delegation was weighing in on a local issue, and that they were not notified the bill was under consideration until after the vote.

"We are strongly opposed to this legislation, not necessarily because we are planning to raise these rates, but because we have never even been afforded the opportunity to have the discussion ... we received no notification that you had concerns about any action that we might take on this issue," the council's letter states. "... Apparently you felt compelled to step in and decide the issue for us."

The letter asks the delegation to "do the responsible thing and withdraw this legislation."

However, another council member said he was upset the letter had been sent without notifying all council members.

Councilman Billy Shreve (R) said he contacted Alzali after he learned about the letter and told her "the highest and best use for the letter was ball it up and throw it away."

Revenue from the hotel tax is a controversial funding element for the proposed downtown Frederick hotel and conference center.

The delegation received the letter during their meeting and offered no comment.

Follow Danielle E. Gaines on Twitter: @daniellegaines.

Jan. 28, 2010

FORECLOSURES TAKE HEAVY TOLL ON HEARTS AND MINDS

By DANIELLE E. GAINES
And DEBORAH SCHOCH

Two weeks ago, a retired telephone company worker named Ethelda Lopez watched as her dream retirement home was auctioned off on the lawn outside a county courthouse in downtown Merced.

“When I heard my address, it was so disheartening,” she said. “It’s amazing how it all works.” For six months, she had made hundreds of calls to her mortgage company, federal officials, local political leaders — begging them all for lower payments or more time. No one paid heed.

Wracked with depression and anxiety, she was too ashamed to tell her friends that she was losing her sprawling stucco-and-stone ranch home in the Atwater countryside. “I couldn’t stop crying myself to sleep,” said Lopez, 51.

“When I started to try to tell my story, it would just come out as crying. I was too embarrassed, too depressed to go out anymore. It’s very trying. I would never wish this on anyone.” Ethelda Lopez’s story is one of two dozen gathered by the Merced Sun-Star in a four-week investigation of the psychological and other health problems wreaked by the local foreclosure crisis. Over and over, residents caught up in that crisis — homeowners, renters, even Realtors — report that they are suffering from stress or depression and are sometimes too ashamed to reach out for help.

This is the hidden human fallout of foreclosure. It is going largely untreated, even as Merced County braces for more state cuts in mental health services. Thousands of new homes like Ethelda Lopez’s sprouted from farmland countywide in the past five years. Merced was gearing up for a bright new future as a college hub. Optimistic developers dreamt of throngs of buyers paying \$300,000 and more so that they could raise their children in neat stucco homes along tranquil cul-de-sacs.

But the dream crumbled, and so did the peace-of-mind that home ownership is supposed to guarantee.

Now, many homeowners are caught up in a nightmare, trying to figure out how to pay mortgages on dwellings worth a fraction of what they owe — or whether they should give up the dream and move on.

Merced County ranked first in California for foreclosure filings in 2009, and sixth among counties nationwide, the national firm RealtyTrac reported two weeks ago. One in seven homes

in this county of 250,000 people has been foreclosed on since September 2006, according to Foreclosure Radar, a California reporting service.

The drama plays out on the courthouse lawn like clockwork, Monday through Friday, at 12:30 and 3 p.m., when Realtors and investors bid for foreclosed homes like Ethelda Lopez's. The crisis shows no signs of abating. In November, one in five Merced County homeowners was 90 days or more delinquent in payments, according to another service, First American CoreLogic. What the statistics don't show is the human toll. Debt-racked residents are suffering from anxiety, sleeplessness and depression in a universe gone sideways.

Clinically, their suffering may not qualify as PTSD, the psychological state felt by soldiers, cops, first-responders and others after a traumatic experience. But far too many Mercedians are in sad shape.

Some are reaching out for help.

At Merced-area health care clinics, workers report an increase in residents experiencing mental distress, and in the seriousness of their symptoms. Many new patients are homeowners or renters fearful of losing their homes and all the stability that a home provides, they say.

"We're seeing more people coming for crisis services, people who have never been in the system before," said Theresa Schoettler, who manages Merced County's in-patient psychiatric unit and walk-in clinic. "A lot of people are self-medicating. There's a lot more alcohol abuse. A lot more despair. Some people say they can't live anymore."

Many more feel so much shame about their financial and emotional distress that they shut themselves off, too fearful to ask for help, mental health workers report. Entire families suffer as stress radiates from debt-plagued parents to their frightened children, they say.

"The trickle-down of this is big. Kids have stomach aches. They don't want to go to school. Then you find out they've just moved in with someone else, their parents are about to lose their homes, they're having trouble paying the mortgage," said Elizabeth Morrison, clinical director of behavioral health at Golden Valley Health Centers, a network of 25 nonprofit community clinics and eight dental sites serving the Merced area.

School leaders are concerned, too. In the Merced Union High School District, which covers students in all of Merced, Atwater and Livingston, 613 students, or 7 percent, reported this year that they were "doubled-up" with another family in a single-family home. At Atwater High School, the number was 12 percent.

Some residents fear they soon will have no home at all.

“I don’t want to end up at that tent camp on Santa Fe,” said one middle-aged woman, who lost her job last year. She asked that her name not be used because she’s looking for employment. “It’s terrifying for a single person to live in a car,” she said.

Another woman, also facing foreclosure, swallows Lexapro and a stew of other anti-depression and anti-anxiety drugs just to make it through the day.

Squeezed clinics

The same economic downturn tied to the real estate crisis is savaging the California state budget, provoking massive cuts in mental health care throughout the state.

Merced County government has seen its number of mental health clinicians cut to 24 from 33 at a time when it needs more counselors, not fewer. Each outpatient nurse’s case load has increased by 125 cases due to the latest staff cuts last September.

In all, county workers’ caseload of ongoing mental health patients has grown from 2,365 in all of the last fiscal year to 2,229 for only the first six months of this one.

Yet a key piece of the department’s budget was cut in half last year in Sacramento, meaning that Merced County lost \$1.1 million earmarked for inpatient and crisis care.

The county’s mental health director, Manuel Jimenez, reports that he, too, grappled with stress when he was forced to lay off employees last year. Now he’s preparing for possible new cuts caused by the latest state budget deficit.

Local clinics are squeezed as well. Patients referred for mental health care used to wait a week or two to see a counselor at the Family Care Clinic at Mercy Medical Center Merced. Today, they may wait a month for an appointment, a clinical psychologist there said.

No statistics are available for exactly how many county residents seeking mental health help are dealing with home foreclosures. Nor has much medical research been conducted on how the wave of foreclosures can affect public health nationwide.

However, an article published in October in the American Journal of Public Health reported on a study of Philadelphia area residents undergoing foreclosure in the summer of 2008.

The findings are grim. More than one-third of those residents met the screening standards for major depression, such as feelings of sadness and changes in appetite or sleep patterns, said the article’s lead author, Dr. Craig E. Pollack, a Rand Corp. researcher and assistant professor of medicine at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. That compares to about 13 percent for people living in poverty.

“The financial stress is quite severe for individuals and their families,” Pollack said in a telephone interview this week. “They’re buying their homes with a great deal of hope and

expectation, and when that hope and expectation turns into disappointment, that can have a very harmful effect on people's health and well-being."

Another researcher, Dr. Esther Sternberg, who has studied stress extensively, said that for a homeowner, foreclosure can provoke a massive emotional upheaval.

"Moving against your wishes, and moving because you've lost everything, is one of the biggest stressors I can imagine," said Sternberg, director of the Integrative Neural Immune Program at the National Institutes of Health and author of the book, "Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-being."

She continued: "There's change. Uncertainty. Fear, because you don't know what's going to happen to you. Different parts of the brain get involved. Then you're grieving the loss of your dream.

"It would be a pretty resilient person who would not develop depression as a result of all of this."

Merced County's renters, too, are wrestling with uncertainty.

To save money, Sam Matthews, his wife Jannel and three children share a rented five-bedroom home in Merced with his brother and mother.

"Everyone in the country, in Merced at least, is living paycheck to paycheck. We banded together for survival," Sam Matthews said. He and Jannel were celebrating their fourth wedding anniversary Jan. 13 when they learned their home was being foreclosed on and sold.

"Our world came crashing to an end," said Sam Matthews, 28, who worries his mother's lung disease and diabetes will worsen because of the upcoming move.

He worries where he can find a rental home for his family. He has heard stories of local college students foreclosed on twice in two separate rental homes.

"Merced seems like ground zero on this," he said.

Burst bubble

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Just a few years ago, Merced flashed all the trappings of a boomtown.

Construction was under way on the gleaming new UC Merced campus, designed to educate 25,000 students in the San Joaquin Valley. That meant new jobs and a new college-town cachet for Merced. Developers began touting it as a bedroom community for would-be homeowners squeezed out of the pricey Bay Area housing market.

So the houses went up, and buyers bit, shouldering huge debt and risky mortgages. But campuses grow slowly; UC Merced's enrollment is 3,414 students today. Many potential out-of-town buyers weren't ready to move into the new homes intended for them.

When the housing bubble burst, Merced County fell hard. With the accompanying recession, the area lost a litany of failed retailers: Mervyns, Linens 'n Things, Circuit City and then Gottschalks, the venerable Fresno-based department store.

The county's only locally owned bank disappeared, too. The federal government took over County Bank in early February 2009 after it was trapped in a quagmire of bad loans to developers, eroding investor confidence.

Merced County's unemployment rate soared. In December, 19.8 percent of workers wanted jobs, far outstripping the 12.4 percent rate for California and the 10 percent rate for the nation overall.

Morrison remembers when she first noticed an uptick in patients seeking mental health counseling at Golden Valley. It was the same time that she began seeing day laborers lined up along Olive Avenue, hoisting signs that touted big closing sales at Mervyns and other stores. The scene reminded her of doomsayers with their end-of-the-world placards.

One of her clients, a man with almost no cash, told her that he had awakened early in hopes of getting a day job holding a sign for Linens 'n Things: "He said that he got there at 5 a.m., and the line was already around the block."

As a therapist, Morrison is trained to ask clients in crisis to think about alternatives -- say, friends and relatives who can loan money or open up their homes. Too often these days, her clients have no alternatives at all. If they lose their homes, they can't rent new quarters without first putting down cash. That can mean a \$700 deposit for a one-bedroom apartment, and another \$700 for the first month's rent.

"It might as well be \$70,000 or \$700,000," Morrison said.

One client already had displayed anxiety and other mental health problems so severe that she was on a fixed disability income. When the house she rented went into foreclosure, she had no money to rent another home. So she moved in with her ex-husband, who had a history of physical abuse and continues to verbally abuse her.

"Now it's the only place she can go," Morrison said.

Some people who hold out hope that they will escape foreclosure find that the stress keeps building, said Robin Adam, district director for state Assemblywoman Cathleen Galgiani, D--Livingston. Adam has fielded countless calls from homeowners seeking help.

“People want to be good for their debts, and it takes them kind of a while to get to the point of saying, ‘This isn’t working at all, no matter what I do,’” he said. “All that time, they worry about it every single day. They talk about it. They just are so stressed about it.”

That pressure can lead to irritability and growing conflict with family members. Men in particular see financial distress as failure, experts said, and they may turn to substance abuse, domestic violence or thoughts of suicide.

“The financial burden can cause other things -- maybe hidden, not talked about -- to come to the surface. Maybe a marriage isn’t able to withstand the conflict that this creates,” said Pastor Jay K. Pierce, who has counseled his parishioners facing foreclosure at the United Methodist Church in Merced.

Tensions can build as families move in together and adult children return home.

“There could be a rosy glow put on that, a silver lining,” Morrison said. “But anecdotally, from what we hear, it’s just a huge amount of stress. People are living in spaces that are much too small to accommodate them. Long-term conflicts are brought to the fore.”

Sam Matthews feels so stressed out about losing his rental home that he “might be meaner to the kids, and then that affects them. The effects get spread all around.”

For Merced County residents on the verge of losing their homes, knowing that their neighbors and friends are in the same straits may or may not be reassuring.

The stigma of foreclosure and bankruptcy may sting less here because so many people are struggling. But jobs remain scarce, and that, coupled with the high foreclosure rate, may make residents even more pessimistic, said Jim McDiarmid, director of behavioral sciences at the Mercy family medical residency program.

“It’s depressing when you realize that you’re living in a community with such high unemployment,” McDiarmid said. “Your chances of getting back on your feet are so much less.”

Last homeowners

This would seem a neighborhood of hope and calm, with its newish middle-class homes, sapling-lined lawns and curving streets christened Early Light, Daybreak, Twilight and Evening Star.

The short drive called Solstice generated a real down-home feel when Michael and Kathi Murdock moved to the development called Horizon at Compass Pointe in North Merced in late November 2004.

Nearly everyone on the street owned their own home. They organized block parties with children’s games and grilled tri-tip. Murdock would turn the garage of his \$255,000 home into a

local movie theater, projecting films onto a big screen. His cousin lived at one end of Solstice, and a close friend across the way.

All that is gone now. One recent day, his cousin's home had just sold for \$115,900 at the 3 p.m. foreclosure auction on the courthouse's front lawn. Now, as darkness falls, he watches his best friend, Tim Stanley, as he loads up a U-Haul. Stanley is leaving his rented home because his landlady is being forced to sell it, fast.

The Murdocks are among the last homeowners left.

Michael gestures across the street: "Renter. Renter. Original owner. Renter. Original owner. Renter. Renter. Renter. Foreclosed."

Some homes are vacant. Others are rented out to UC Merced students who live six to a house for a few hundred dollars apiece. Landscaping goes unpruned here and there, and lawns turn yellow. A local self-storage firm recently hung advertizing fliers on the doorknobs of every house on the block.

Solstice was built for children on tricycles and teenagers on skateboards. Now it feels like a ghost street.

Michael and Kathi may leave, too. They have talked about letting their house go, walking away after their five-year-fixed rate expires on their adjustable rate mortgage.

Kathi works for a credit union, and he works at the high school district in technology and as a freshman football coach. They expected to have money saved for a higher mortgage payment, but neither of them has gotten a raise in three years, Michael said.

Kathi suffers from epilepsy, and she recently took one month's disability leave from her job as a bank teller. That may mean a missed mortgage in February.

Now the couple is prioritizing bills, paying the ones they can, putting off the others. When they paid all the bills, there was no money left for food and gas. The creditors are calling.

"They Fed-Ex stuff to you. They call you at work. They call you at home," Michael said.

"I'm trying not to stress about it," Kathi said.

But for them and hundreds -- maybe thousands -- of Mercedians, stress is all that's left.

Feb. 17, 2010

MERCED COUNTY EXECUTIVES BEING OFFERED SWEET, LUCRATIVE DEALS
Expertise of former head of public health department justified consultant position, officials contend

By DANIELLE E. GAINES
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John Volanti, former head of the Merced County Department of Public Health, got a sweet deal twice when he retired last month.

On top of a \$6,153 pay bump for giving one year's notice before leaving, Volanti also got a \$75,000 consultant contract.

A call to Volanti's home phone wasn't returned by Tuesday evening.

County leaders interviewed Tuesday said the consultant contract was worth the expense because of Volanti's expertise on local public health issues. The same leaders said they stood behind the 5 percent pay increase, especially since the program has since ended.

A series of decisions by the Board of Supervisors that began in March 2009 ultimately led to Volanti's early retirement -- even after he received the pay boost for 10 months -- and the contract as a consultant.

Volanti announced his retirement as county public health director April 14, 2009. Volanti soon began receiving an extra \$293 every two weeks for giving notice that his last day would be March 26, 2010, according to county records.

This Jan. 12, Volanti pushed his retirement earlier -- to Jan. 15 from March 26, effectively leaving before the 346 days he gave as notice. The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to approve the date change.

Tammy Moss, deputy public health director, was promoted to the department's top position, a move that came with a 10 percent temporary raise.

Later, on Jan. 26, Volanti was rehired by the county as a consultant making \$115 a hour. He can make another \$75,000 working for the county on that contract, which is good until Dec. 31, 2010.

Moss will continue to report to the CEO's office until a replacement is hired. County officials said Tuesday they were unsure whether a search had started for Volanti's replacement before his departure in mid-January.

At the same board meeting when Volanti was hired as a consultant Jan. 26, the supervisors did away with the 5-percent pay bump incentive for future departures. CEO Larry Combs said the program was unnecessary.

“It was this case, but not because of this case, that brought the program to my attention, and I took an item to the Board of Supervisors to terminate the program,” Combs said Tuesday. “There was a good intent for the program when it was installed, and John entered into the contract in good faith, and I couldn’t see punishing him for needing to leave early.”

Combs said the county had long planned -- even before Dee Tatum’s retirement -- to contract on certain issues with Volanti after retirement. According to the consultant contract, Volanti will continue as the primary negotiator with Catholic Healthcare West over medical services to South Side residents. He will also continue to work on several programs for MediCal and indigent public health patients.

Volanti’s contract also includes a clause allowing him to “advise on and participate in other studies, analysis or special projects related to health as needed.”

“I think that’s mainly flexibility,” said county spokeswoman Katie Albertson. “The purpose of the contract is for those key issues, but we want to have flexibility in case something comes up.”

Supervisors Hub Walsh and John Pedrozo said Volanti remained valuable to the county public health department.

“Mr. Volanti was a real asset to Merced County and to the health department. With the hospital transition coming up, I think it was real important to keep him on as a consultant,” Pedrozo said. “That’s a lot of money. I understand that. But I think that John was such a good department head that he didn’t want to leave early in the first place.”

Walsh said keeping Volanti as a consultant was also a prudent financial decision.

“If you need expertise on those levels of complexity,” he said about the negotiations with Catholic Healthcare West, “then I think it is best to contract with someone who already knows rather than starting with someone brand-new.”

Volanti had served as the county’s public health director since 2003. Before coming to Merced County, Volanti worked at four other county health departments, most recently as San Mateo County’s deputy director for community clinics, during his 35-year career.

He retired with a final yearly salary of \$163,092.

The Washington Post

THE PUSH TO GET THE MERCURY OUT

Thursday, February 17, 2011

By Danielle E. Gaines

For 110 years, since the doors of the National Institute of Standards and Technology opened, scientists there have calibrated mercury thermometers to read correct temperatures for users in the aerospace, pharmaceutical, petroleum and other industries.

That legacy soon will end.

Beginning March 1, the Gaithersburg-based federal agency no longer will provide that calibration service. The move is part of a larger government program to reduce dependence on industrial mercury thermometers, which in some cases are less reliable than newer technology, said Greg Strouse, a physicist and leader of NIST's Temperature and Humidity Group.

The program is being led by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which issued a memorandum in September 2008 calling for the phase-out of all mercury, non-ferrous thermometers used in EPA laboratories.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that can cause neurological and breathing problems, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Exposure to small spills from broken thermometers generally does not have demonstrable health effects, according to a federal Mercury Workgroup study from February 2009. But elemental mercury found in thermometers and used in industrial processes makes its way into streams, rivers and oceans if it is released into the environment. The mercury is absorbed by sea life and accumulates in larger fish that people eat.

Nearly all methylmercury exposures in the United States occur through eating fish and shellfish, according to the EPA.

Mercury spills are tracked in several national databases managed by the CDC, the U.S. Coast Guard, the American Association of Poison Control Centers and the EPA.

In 2009, poison control centers fielded 3,999 calls about mercury cleanup from broken thermometers and 3,632 calls for other mercury cleanups, according to the national nonprofit organization's annual report. The number of calls for broken thermometer cleanup has decreased in recent years, according to the Workgroup report.

The EPA is working to change federal and state regulations that require the use of mercury thermometers for certain industries by citing the standards set by international organizations, such as ASTM International - formerly the American Society for Testing and Materials - and the American Petroleum Institute.

About 300 of the nearly 700 ASTM standards have been changed to allow use of mercury-free liquid-in-glass and digital thermometers, according to NIST.

NIST research Dawn Cross is a leader in identifying alternatives to mercury thermometers. She says the remaining ASTM standards will be amended within three years to include procedures for switching to mercury thermometer alternatives, according to a news release from the agency announcing the end of the calibration services.

Starting in 2007, Cross led a campaign to reduce mercury at NIST's sprawling headquarters in Gaithersburg. She found more than 8,000 industrial-use mercury thermometers stored in laboratory drawers and storage cabinets, Strouse said.

The sale and distribution of mercury thermometers without a doctor's prescription has been illegal in Maryland since 2002, according to the Maryland Department of the Environment's Web site.

Many of the thermometers found at NIST had long been forgotten, Strouse said.

Cross helped researchers who were using mercury thermometers to find new tools for measuring temperature. The thermometers were sent to specialized recycling centers, where the mercury is repurposed for use in compact fluorescent light bulbs.

That recycling reduced the amount of mercury released into the environment by a factor of four, Strouse said. One thermometer - which contains about 500 milligrams of mercury - can power 125 compact fluorescent light bulbs. The bulbs, in turn, use less electricity than incandescent bulbs, so less coal is burned to create power.

The demand for thermometer calibration at NIST has been declining steadily in recent years, Strouse said. When he started working there 23 years ago, the agency was doing 700 calibrations per year. Last year, the lab handled four.

"You can see the cultural change is occurring," Strouse said. "This is helping to push those last few places in industry to make changes - and getting mercury out of the environment is a good thing."