

# Therapist runs for North Marin seat (Point Reyes Light)

By Anna Guth

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It's been nearly 15 years since a woman sat on the board of the North Marin Water District, but that fact isn't stopping Tina McMillan, a psychotherapist from Novato, from challenging two incumbents for a seat this November.

For the district's current board president, Rick Fraites, a former aide to Marin County supervisors, this year also marks the first contested race since his election in 2003. The other incumbent, Jim Grossi, an engineer and a rancher, was appointed last year following the death of longtime director John Schoonover.

All three candidates are residents of Novato, the largest recipient of North Marin's water, with 20,000 customers. But the district also serves about 750 households in Point Reyes Station, Olema, Inverness Park and Paradise Ranch Estates and Oceana Marin in Dillon Beach. The board has lacked a West Marin resident since Dennis Rodoni left to take his position as District Four supervisor.

Ms. McMillan is running in part to improve communication between the district and its customers, a priority the board recently identified. She sees inviting feedback in the form of surveys, better showcasing the district's programs and keeping in contact with customers through social media or through a new district position.

Ms. McMillan also argues the district must articulate the connection between water conservation and climate change. "In Marin, people are educated enough about climate change that, if we connect the dots, it will make sense why drought and wildfire and flood are having a direct impact on water usage," she said.

As far as the all-male board, Ms. McMillan said, "It's time to revisit that glass ceiling."

Barbara Munden, a Novato resident, served on the board from 1975 to 1991 and then again as a temporary appointment in 2003. Point Reyes Station resident Rhonda Kutter, who now works as one of Supervisor Rodoni's two aides, ran last year for his seat, but lost in a board coin toss to Novato resident Michael Joly.

Ms. McMillan says women are important stakeholders in the board's outreach efforts. "In terms of conservation, in many cases, it's women you are trying to reach to modify or change consumer habits," she said. "In my household, for 30 years I have been in charge of water, buying the washing machine, the dishwasher, the irrigation in the garden."

Ms. McMillan, who called herself a research geek, has been monitoring her household's daily water use through a new program that allows customers to access their information online. Yet, she asked, how many other customers even know about the new resource?

She also highlighted the district's water recycling program. Currently, North Marin purchases treated recycled water from local districts, Novato Sanitary and Las Gallinas Sanitary, and distributes it to 60 large customers, including a golf course and two car washes.

Mr. Fraites and Mr. Grossi pointed to these programs as sources of pride, and to varying degrees agreed that communication with customers could improve. Mr. Grossi said ramping up social media

was a good idea, but Mr. Fraites questioned how interested customers are in the district's work, as long it's running smoothly. The district puts out a newsletter two to three times a year and notifies residents when a new project kicks off.

The board always evaluates the public feedback it receives, Mr. Fraites added. In Novato, recent 5 percent rate increases met 10 letters of opposition and one letter of support, he recounted. "We're the quiet district," he said. "Inherent with a small district, people assume things are going right."

In West Marin, all candidates highlighted the importance of monitoring aging infrastructure and providing upgrades as necessary. The largest of several capital improvement projects underway is the replacement of a water tank in Paradise Ranch Estates that burned over two decades ago in the Mount Vision Fire. The project, which is awaiting permits, was originally estimated to cost \$525,000, but is now projected at \$775,000.

Other system improvements include the construction of wells and a solids-handling facility, and upgrades to the Point Reyes Station treatment plant. The district recently replaced one filter at the plant at a cost of \$75,000 and will replace another for the same price next year.

The construction of a \$300,000 second well on the Gallagher Ranch, meant to curb the district's use of old wells at its Coast Guard site when they suffer from salinity intrusion, is also in the works.

A proposed solids-handling facility would provide the district with more tanks so that certain residue materials can settle and be disposed of offsite rather than directly onto the land. The district hopes to lower the cost of the \$1.3 million project by around 20 percent by expanding its easement on the Coast Guard property, pending the county's purchase of that land.

"Just like Novato, we watch over West Marin," Mr. Fraites said. "I think we serve West Marin very well and will continue to do so. If we are doing something wrong, we want to hear from you."

Mr. Grossi, who lives on the West Novato ranch where his father was born in 1912, said he has deep family ties to the local ranching community. He emphasized both the need for more redundancy in the water system in the face of natural disasters and the importance of collaboration between ranchers and the district to protect water resources.

"West Marin is where much of my interest lies," he said.