



Radical environmental protectionism in a small community : a study of the Bolinas water moratorium
by Marguerite Kirk Harris

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in
History

Montana State University

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Abstract:

A moratorium on further extension of water service was instituted to halt population growth in Bolinas, California on November 26, 1971 by the Bolinas Community Public Utilities District. This action by the recently elected Public Utilities Board reflected community attitudes towards environmental concerns which had developed in response to recent moves to further develop and commercialize the area.

Political response to environmental issues resulted in defeat of supporters of a multi-million dollar regional sewerage system.

The ideology of the new community leadership contained elements of the radical "New Left" movement of the sixties, environmental protectionism, agrarian romanticism, and parallels to the American populist movement.

The ideology when put into practice at Bolinas revealed a number of discrepancies not anticipated at the outset. Tactics used to retain the moratorium resulted in deterioration of the water supply, inadequate fire protection, and an increase in the occupancy of sub-standard illegal dwellings. Meanwhile real estate prices rose, pricing many of the original supporters of a no-growth policy for Bolinas out of residency. Growth was not appreciably affected by the moratorium; the population has more than doubled in a five-year period. The mixed rural and vacation community is well on its way to becoming an expensive and therefore exclusive suburb.

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August 8, 1977

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A STUDY OF THE BOLINAS WATER MORATORIUM

by

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Approved:


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Bozeman, Montana

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. . . a little thinking must be done, and done well,
before even the simplest historical fact can be
considered.

Paul Feyerabend

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ABSTRACT

A moratorium on further extension of water service was instituted to halt population growth in Bolinas, California on November 26, 1971 by the Bolinas Community Public Utilities District. This action by the recently elected Public Utilities Board reflected community attitudes towards environmental concerns which had developed in response to recent moves to further develop and commercialize the area.

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I. INTRODUCTION

On November 26, 1971 the directors of a small public utilities district in a coastal area of northern California passed a resolution establishing a moratorium on the extension of its water service. This was one of the first attempts by an American community to effect zero growth control using such means.

Whereas other communities used zoning to control population growth and density, Bolinas, an unincorporated area without zoning power, used the withholding of water as a means to curtail growth. The four out of five directors who voted for the water moratorium had just been elected to the board of the Bolinas Community Public Utilities District, the only locally elected governmental agency in Bolinas. The issues of the recent campaign had centered on the implications for growth of a proposed sewage treatment and collection system. The incumbents, two of whom were defeated in a recall vote, had approved a plan for a sewerage system to accommodate a large increase in population. The successful candidates had emphasized the high cost of the plan and its potential for providing a sharp increase in the population density of the Bolinas area. The related issues of local control of the environment and local autonomy over the allocation of land and water resources had also been part of the new board members' platform.

The language of the moratorium, which the new directors passed minutes after taking their seats, reflects some of the rhetoric and temper of the recent election:

BOLINAS COMMUNITY PUBLIC UTILITY DISTRICT

RESOLUTION NO. 93

NOVEMBER 26, 1971

WHEREAS the land areas encompassed by the Bolinas Community Public Utility District contain canyons, ridge-tops, mesas, a lagoon and ocean beach frontage which in total comprise a unique and irreplaceable [sic] combination of natural features providing a habitat for a variety of life forms including quail for which species a part of the above described land serves as a refuge; and

WHEREAS this area is threatened with chaotic human influx capable of destroying the existing delicate ecological balance already threatened; and

WHEREAS the existing water supply is inadequate to meet the health and safety standards creating in the summer months a serious fire hazard that is dangerous and constitutes a threat to human life and property; and

WHEREAS the water delivery system is in need of repair in order to meet the minimal needs of the inhabitants' district and that any further extension of its water delivery service would tax the resources of the district beyond the reasonable limits of its facilities; and

WHEREAS other necessary facilities are also either inadequate, harmful, or well below minimal acceptable standards such as sewerage, drainage, fire protection, transit facilities, medical care, etc.; and

WHEREAS further extension of the dedication of the district would seriously impair the ability of the district to provide water to its users;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Bolinas Community Public Utility District hereby limit its dedication to the territory and to the water consumers that the district now supplies with water and do hereby declare that its policy is to establish, as of this date, a moratorium on providing its service of water to new construction requiring same until such time as a thorough

and comprehensive evaluation of the entire area is made to which this Board is committed in its capacity as a Public Utility District.¹

The ecological point of view expressed in the opening paragraphs was an indication of the attitudes of the newly elected directors, and was intended to elicit a sympathetic response from their constituents. Concern for the Bolinas environment had been an issue in a referendum vote on the use of the Bolinas Lagoon two and a half years before. The result of that vote was the defeat of a "commercialized" harbor plan for the Bolinas Lagoon. In January of 1971 a San Francisco oil spill, which had involved many Bolinas people in a concerted effort to save birds and lagoon from the black mess that had washed up on the shore, had also alerted them to threats to their environment.

The intent of the moratorium was to halt population growth by stopping building. Bolinas, an unincorporated area, is under the jurisdiction of Marin County, which regulates new building construction through the departments of building, planning and health. Before a building permit could be granted, adequate utilities had to be assured. By denying a necessary utility, the moratorium was, in one sense, asserting local control as opposed to county authority. The wording of the last five paragraphs of Resolution #93 was intended to

¹Bolinas Community Public Utilities District, Bolinas, California. Book of Resolutions, Resolution #93.

give legal sanction to the water moratorium and to make it stick--at least long enough for local planning and zoning to become a part of the county master plan for population density and land use.

This anti-growth sentiment and action on the part of the directors and their supporters in Bolinas, California, had its parallels in other communities and towns across the country, where a heightened sense of environmental protectiveness had been gathering momentum in the early 1970's. In many communities voters had passed measures which they hoped would stop the defacement of the hillsides, the congestion of their streets, and the crowding of their schools. Some measures were designed simply to keep people out. By restricting the amount the state could spend, citizens of Colorado voted not to host the 1976 Olympics; voters in Florida and California passed multi-million dollar bond issues to purchase open space and parks. Some local communities tried to use what power they had to slow growth in their area or to stop it altogether. To curtail population and control density, laws restricting building heights and number of houses were employed with more frequency. Carson City, Nevada, and Boca Raton, Florida, set absolute limits on population by restricting the total number of houses that could ever be built within their city limits.¹

¹New York Times, July 29, 1974, p. 20C.

These approaches were frequently accompanied by demands for local control of the environment--a political movement which not only paralleled the environmental movement but was corollary to it. The people making these political and environmental demands organized their campaigns in urban as well as rural communities. Their use of neo-populist slogans, their disregard for traditional land development, and the activist character of their responses caused the supporters of these population checks and environmental measures to be termed radical. "As ecologists begin to act," James Ridgeway wrote, "putting their ideas into practice, they emerge as radicals."¹

The Bolinas moratorium on water hook-ups and the events related to its passage contain elements associated with these national trends. This paper will examine this event in relation to other events both before and after November 26, 1971. What preceded the moratorium in Bolinas? What have been the consequences?² What have been the short-term results of an attempt at growth control?

¹James Ridgeway, The Politics of Ecology (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970), p. 80.

²The history of any subject, especially one of such short span, has no "cut-off" date; it goes on and on, one event related to another in infinite series. This study, written in the fall and winter of 1976-77, has focused on events from 1971 to 1976. It makes no pretence to have probed the full range of consequences of the Bolinas water moratorium. The significance of trends, or problems and responses, and the consequences of events occurring in 1977 and after require further investigation for their understanding.

What have been the actions and the stated intent of those actions on the part of the moratorium supporters in Bolinas? Have there been discrepancies between the announced objectives and the actual outcomes? Considered in this way, the history of the Bolinas water moratorium may be taken as an example of an attempt to curtail population growth in a small community and may, at least such is the author's hope, further the reader's understanding of the radical protectionist nature of these events.

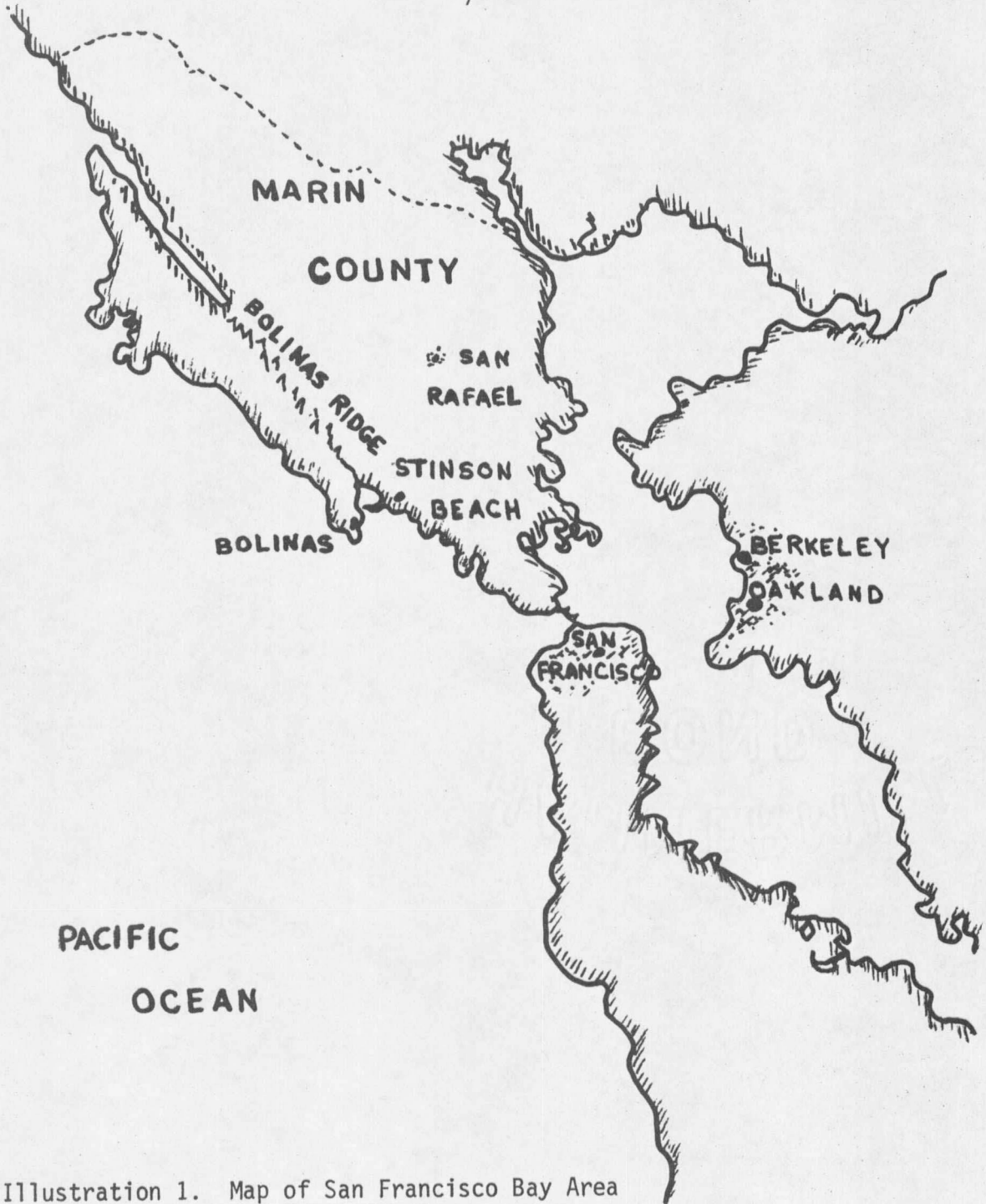


Illustration 1. Map of San Francisco Bay Area and Marin County

